

Contemporary  
Bulgarian  
Prose  
2018



Национален  
фонд  
„Култура“

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*D*ear publishers and friends of Bulgarian literature, It is my pleasure to present to you this catalogue, containing 33 of the most established Bulgarian authors. In their wonderful fictional works, they share their artistic explorations, their fervor, their reevaluation of historical context, and their interesting viewpoints on modern times. The collection represents a cross-section of contemporary Bulgarian prose from July 2016 to December 2017. The project is remarkable because it brings together some of the most distinctive authors and books on absolutely equal footing.

This is the third catalogue of Bulgarian Contemporary Prose compiled by the National Book Centre. We have also two catalogues of Children's Books from Bulgaria: Contemporary Writers and Artists.

The National Book Centre has a mission to support the publication, promotion and popularization of Bulgarian literature at home and throughout the world. It helps publishers, authors and their work to be accessible to everyone. One of the fundamental aims is to support the translation of more Bulgarian books into foreign languages.

We believe that literary translators are the greatest ambassadors of the spirit, culture and history of each state. Their role is of the utmost importance for mutual understanding of all nations in a united Europe and around the world.

**Iya PETKOVA**

*Director of the Department for Strategic  
Development, Marketing, and Production  
at the National Palace of Culture*

## NATIONAL PALACE OF CULTURE

The National Palace of Culture – Congress Centre Sofia (NPC) is one of the largest multi-purpose venues in Southeastern Europe. Opened in 1981, NPC is designed to host a wide range of events, such as international congresses, official meetings, conferences, international conventions, summits, exhibitions, festivals, concerts and other cultural events. The Palace houses a rich variety of the most distinguished Bulgarian collections of visual art designed by some of the country's most prominent artists. These monumental works are integrated into the conceptual architecture and design of NPC. Currently, the National Palace of Culture seeks to give new dynamics to its environment by establishing diverse contemporary art spaces that are meant to shape Sofia's cultural life. In 2018 the National Palace of Culture hosted the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU.



## NATIONAL BOOK CENTRE

The National Book Centre was founded in early 2015 under the auspices of the National Palace of Culture. The director of the National Book Centre is Mihaela Petrova. The goal of the centre is to interact with state institutions, universities, schools and others, without usurping the functions of the state. The National Book Centre in Sofia was established with the help of the Ministry of Culture and is supported by the Bulgarian Book Association.

The National Book Centre's purpose is to support the publishing, distribution and popularization of Bulgarian literature in the country and abroad. The "Bulgarian Book" and "Translations" programs are designed for Bulgarian and foreign publishers engaged in the task of positioning Bulgarian literature in its rightful place on the world literary scene. The National Book Centre's program for supporting Bulgarian literature is open to foreign publishers across the globe for fiction and non-fiction books from contemporary and classic Bulgarian authors, translated from Bulgarian into any other language and to be published as a first edition in the given country. The funding covers up to 80% of the translation cost, after the receipt of a properly filled-out application form and after approval from the council of experts. Grants are to be used solely for the translation costs of the chosen title. Projects will also be assessed for literary quality, as well as on the strength of the publishing project and strategy. The programs are open on a rolling basis and candidates can apply online at any time of the year. The results are announced 60 days after submission. Applications must be submitted by email along with all the requested documents to the following address: [nbc@ndk.bg](mailto:nbc@ndk.bg)

On our page on the website [www.ndk.bg](http://www.ndk.bg) you can find our catalogues, application forms and more information about translators, writers and their most interesting projects.

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# Alek POPOV

Alek Popov (born Sofia, Bulgaria, 1966) is one of the leading contemporary Bulgarian writers, working not only as a novelist but also dramatist, essayist and short-story writer. His hugely successful first novel, the comic satire *Mission London*, based on his experiences as Bulgarian cultural attaché in London, has been translated in sixteen languages. The book was filmed in 2010, becoming the most popular Bulgarian film since the revolution of 1990 and being described by *Variety* as ‘a breakthrough phenomenon’.

Award-winning *The Black Box*, his second novel, has so far appeared in six languages, including English, and was a bestseller in German translation as well as the original Bulgarian edition. *Palaveev Sisters: In the Storm of History*, his third novel, won the Helikon Award for best prose book of 2013 and was translated in German under the title *Schneeweißchen und Partisanenrot* (*Snow White and Partisan Red*). The second part of the novel *The Palaveev Sisters: On the Road to the New World* was released in 2017.

Over the years Alek Popov has won many literary awards including the **Elias Canetti Prize** for his novel *The Black Box*, 2007; **Helikon Award** for best prose book of the year, 2002, 2013; the **Chudomir Award** for satirical fiction (*Snow-White/Partisan-Red*)

2013; **The Reading Man Prize**, 2012; **The Ivan Radoev National Prize for Drama**, 2004, and etc. In 2012, Alek Popov was elected corresponding fellow of the **Bulgarian Academy of Science** in the field of Arts.

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# The Palaveev Sisters: On the Road to the New World

*Excerpt / Translated by Kalina Todorova*

**I**n early 1943, while Paulus' Sixth Army was still agonizing at Stalingrad, Sturmbannführer von Achs found himself far from the front, deep in the Balkans, entrusted with an unusual mission: to find, gather and dispatch a certain number of individuals with strictly defined height parameters to Poland, according to strict orders. The operation was given the code name "Liliputaner." On a frosty January morning, von Achs showed up in the office of General Paul Bader, the German military commander in Serbia, clicked his heels, gave a stiff-armed salute and presented his documents, personally signed by Himmler. Bader, who was already having enough trouble with the Partisans of the Yugoslav People's Army, just snorted with annoyance and sceptically raised his eyebrows.

'How will this be of any use at the front?'

'I couldn't possibly know,' von Achs shrugged. 'I'm only responsible for deliveries.'

'You've fixed yourself up real nice,' Bader sighed. 'Some are dropping like flies on the Eastern Front, others are cramped in submarines, still others are chasing Partisans like fools in the mountains, and you... I guess some people are born lucky.'

He ordered his ordinary to bring two shot glasses. A dense fragrance of plums filled the air. Von Achs discreetly pulled on the sleeve of his black tunic and looked at his watch. It wasn't even ten yet.

'I know what you're thinking, but this is how things are here. In a month or two, if you're still around, you won't even notice it. *Prost!*'

'*Prost!*' The Sturmbannführer diligently emptied his glass.

He himself was rather short, but proportionally built and quite sturdy, with bulky hairy wrists indicating a brutally systematic personality. He was soon to be fifty and had already almost acquiesced to his professional status at the Statistics Bureau of the SS Main Economic and Administrative Office, when he was entrusted with this important task. Some would say that he had caught the caboose of the last train. Where to exactly? Von Achs avoided asking himself questions that he didn't have the answers to. Maybe this was exactly why he had been chosen.

'But who knows...?' Bader threw into the conversation. 'It might help. You never know what you might find down the rabbit hole, as they say. Sometimes a small leak sinks a great ship. I've never thought about this before, but we can possibly find a reasonable application for them. I've read somewhere that dwarves are descendants of an ancient Germanic people who chose to live beneath the Earth's surface. But after losing their means

of sustenance in the late Middle Ages, they came out and adopted the characteristics of the locals. If we manage to revive their genetics, we could make them fight for the Reich. How about putting them into controllable torpedoes and rockets, for example? We should simply select the right number and indoctrinate them to pledge allegiance to our Aryan ideals. *Zwergenmacht!* This could turn the course of the war.'

Von Achs tried to detect a hidden irony, but the General remained solemn as befitting his rank, so he preferred to keep silent.

'Here's what we'll do, Sturmbannführer,' Bader continued in a businesslike manner. 'We'll form one *Sonderkommando* and I'll order the local authorities to cooperate with you. I understand that your operation is of strategic importance to the Reich's future, but we're currently preparing the spring offensive against the Partisans and this is all I can spare... You are dismissed.'

At the beginning of February the news about the catastrophe at Stalingrad had already cast its long shadow over frost-bound Europe. The days seemed to have stopped growing and the streets woke up covered with even bigger and bolder slogans. Three Opel Blitz trucks left Belgrade and cut through the dense morning fog, lying heavy over the road to Niš. The column was led by a light armoured Horch M-222 Schwarz Graue vehicle, painted in the Wehrmacht's typical dark grey color. The staff Mercedes with von Achs on board was comfortably driving in the safe area between the Horch and the trucks. In von Achs's lap, there was a folder with a list of towns and villages where, according to the intelligence services, the population of little people was concentrated.

However, already in Požarevac, it became clear that this preliminary data was quite inaccurate, even misleading. Out of 16 detainees, only one was shorter than 4'7": the watchmaker Darko Papazyan, who was directly taken away from his workshop counter, his magnifying glass still in his eye. All the rest more or less stood above this line, while the baker Rajić couldn't even fit between the jaws of the huge wooden caliper which Corporal Scheuble conscientiously measured the detainees with. Von Achs was beyond himself with anger because of this negligence. He himself was about an inch shorter than the Rajić in question and saw in this paradox malicious irony, undermining his authority.

'*Was ist das?!*' He started shouting at Kosta Babić, the local representative of the Nedić administration, charged with the task of compiling the list.

Babić was above 6'5" with a harsh Šumadijan face and a rebel's cap, cocked to one side, above the ear. He looked at von Achs from head to toe and made a daring remark: 'This is how things are in our region, Herr Offizier. Everything's big. Both cocks and pumpkins, as well as dwarves!'

'You moron!' The German waved him away, after the interpreter had conveyed the general meaning of what had been said.

The same awkward situation repeated itself in Mitrovica, Kruševac, Podujevo, Kuršumljija, Pečenjevce, Prokuplje and other towns and villages with unpronounceable Slavic names. Von Achs' *Sonderkommando* traveled hundreds of miles on the bumpy Balkan roads through snow and ice, which gradually turned into mud – deep, sticky and hopeless. From time to time they ran out of gas and had to spend days on end in some isolated town or village until they received new supplies. The country was divided: some regions were controlled by the Wehrmacht, others – by the Bulgarians, still others – by rebels, Italians, Ustashe, entangled in unintelligible relations; units of the Partisans of the Yugoslav People's Army had entrenched themselves in the least accessible regions. Von Achs was constantly losing men, without even having taken part in military actions. They simply vanished, disappeared into thin air with all their weapons; only the empty spot in the line served as a reminder that there used to be a soldier there. Their bodies were never found. Von Achs had to attend a mass execution. More and more often, a shot of *rakija* would accompany his cup of morning chicory coffee and he remembered the prophetic words of General Bader: 'In a month or two, if you're still around, you won't even notice it.'

At the end of April it was already crystal clear that the ambitious quota of 250 *Liliputaner* could not be filled. The catch was miserable – just 40. It didn't really matter to what extent this was due to a mismatch between the measurements and standards or due to sabotage. His promotion was postponed. His only comfort was that he would soon be far away from this savage country.

While bouncing down the second-class road between Medovo and Prokuplje, von Achs could already imagine stamping the cattle wagon and letting it roll all the way to Poland, using the thoughtfully planned and integrated transport network of New Europe. He himself would go back to the Statistics Bureau and take up his rather unexciting tasks, which he had suddenly grown fond of. And one day, when this damn mess was over (because it would certainly be over!), he wouldn't be embarrassed to say: here, I also took part in the war, I made my contribution, no matter how small it might have been... The armoured Horch with the erect machine-gun was leading the column. Behind it, the Mercedes with the dozing von Achs onboard was rolling along, followed by the three Opel Blitz trucks. On the chassis of the first, there was a mounted metal trailer with the dwarves being juggled about inside it. The last one was carrying the field kitchen, which jumped at any bump along the way.

It seemed to him that someone asked him in his sleep: 'Why on earth did you need those dwarves, anyway?' Actually, I don't know, he shrugged. Maybe I should ask Himmler. The war has been over for a long time now. Himmler, a bit older, but still as neat as before, is trimming the rose bushes in the garden of his suburban house. Why did we need those dwarves, Herr Himmler? What dwarves, my friend?! Click, click, the scissors



are trimming. Petals are flying around. Well, the ones we sent to Poland. Himmler gapes and forgets to close the scissors. But he quickly pulls himself together. Ah, yes, in times of war anything can happen. All sorts of fantastic ideas come into existence. And what's worse, they are immediately put into effect. Hmm... – Himmler wrinkles his forehead. – There must have been a reason. But personally, I can't remember. I had so many things to deal with. It must have been one of the fancies of that guy, Dr Mengele. Ask him. Unfortunately, it's already too late. We had to hang him for war crimes. The number of times he led me astray! One psycho is enough to tarnish the whole ideal. Yet, such were the times. If anyone asks, that is the answer. Such were the times, yes. What even made you think of these dwarves?

Something shoved him to the opposite end of his seat. His peaked cap had fallen over his face and first, there was only darkness. Automatic gunfire. A clash. The car crashed into a roadside pillar. The windshield was smashed to smithereens. The driver had slumped over the steering wheel, soaked in blood. The horn was howling. The hood was steaming.

'Scheiße!' von Achs swore.

A part of the road was missing – as if it had been bitten off. The armoured Horch was rolling somewhere in the gully. Through the rear window he caught a glimpse of a burning truck. The soldiers were jumping off the truck in panic. He took out his Walther and crawled between the seats. Holes were gaping in the tin of the car door, bright light passing through. He heard a metallic. It reminded him of scissors clicking. For an instant, an endless plot of thorny stems expanded in front of his eyes. The heads of the roses were cut off, lying in the soil.

Pink, white, cream-colored, red...

The door suddenly opened. For a moment he hesitated. Should he shoot or put his hands up? How do you say *I surrender* in Serbian? *Give yourself up* was the only thing he remembered. This turned out to be fatal. A jagged tongue of fire erupted from the gun's tip and smashed him into atoms. He collected his wits, seconds before they dissolved into the salvation of nothingness. His retina captured the sight of a slim young woman with a light machine gun in her hands. She seemed gigantic. Two bullet belts with heavenly copper gloss were crossed over her chest. Her face was as white as an icy peak. Sewed onto her three-pronged cap was a five-pointed crimson star, looking solemnly at him like a third eye of some kind.

The shaft of light was getting narrower.

'You fascist son of a bitch!' Her voice echoed in his emptying consciousness together with the last beam of light that reached the bottom of his eyes.



# Alexander CHOBANOV

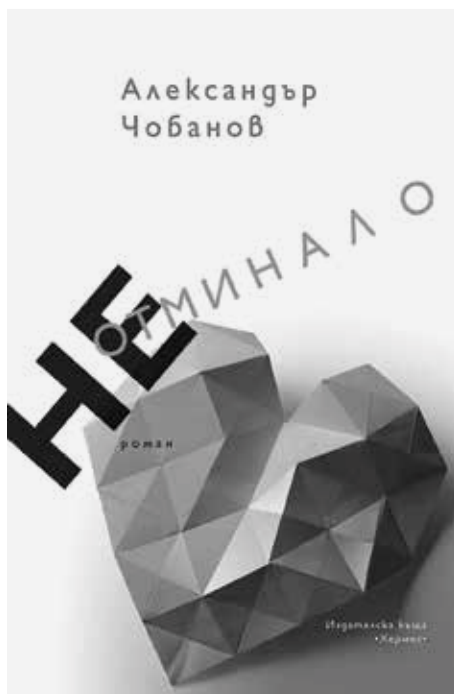
Alexander Chobanov is currently one of the most interesting contemporary young authors. He is only 38 years old, but he has five published books, and won prestigious literary awards. He is a successful screenwriter as well.

In 2008 his collection of short stories, *Collection 18*, was published. For this book Chobanov won the Southern Spring Award for Best Debut. In 2011 his second book was released, *Summer Afternoon*, followed by the novel *Kids* (2013) and the collection of stories *Quantum Garden* (2015). In 2016, he won the Svetlostrui Award for *Quantum Garden*.

Alexander Chobanov is also a co-writer for the TV series “Undercover”, “The Fourth Power”, “The Tree of Life” and others.

## Synopsis

Gabriel and Sarah meet in the late 1980s when the Berlin Wall falls. The obstacles in the way of their love are many, yet they are determined to stay together. Emma and Phillip are their opposites. Their first meeting is in the new millennium. They have everything – freedom, communication, opportunities, but they cannot appreciate them. What do these people have in common? Will Gabriel and Sarah be together? Will Emma and Philip keep up their relationship? The answers to these questions are hidden in their *Not Over and Done*.



# Not Over and Done

*Excerpt / Translated by Ivelina Ivanova*

## PART THREE

She hated her parents. She hated them, because they stood between her and Gabriel. But Sarah didn't want to run away. That night they simply got into the running Lada, loaded it up with luggage, and left. It was so cramped in the backseat that on every turn of the road either her mother's brown suitcases or the box with dry food were falling all over Sarah. That is why she hated them. Why must parents choose the future of their children? She wanted to tell them this even back then – on that night in the car that was flying down the road full of potholes. She still remembered the sound of the engine. Here, in America, the cars buzzed in a different way. The Lada sounded like a woodcutter, not a car. American cars roared like a herd of bison. She didn't like either of them. She hated machines. She wanted to see Gabriel. She wanted to stay with him. What's so bad about staying with the one you love? Sarah was sure of this, just as she was sure that her place wasn't here in this country of unlimited possibilities. She cautiously walked into the living room of the house they had rented, no one was there. Sarah wanted to be with Gabriel, but she gradually realized she might not see him anytime soon. She poured herself a glass of water and looked towards the backyard. The cold liquid seemed to wash away the pain in her stomach, which she was feeling she had had since they had left Bulgaria. But whenever she thought about Gabriel, the burning pain would return. And all the stupid books here were in English. Her father didn't let her take her books because there was no room in their luggage. She adored reading, so that was the biggest act of cruelty for her after her separation from Gabriel. They had taken the three most precious things away from her – books, Gabriel, and her neighborhood, and on top of it all they had been taken away by her own parents who claimed to love her more than anyone in the world. "Maybe that's why some people get married and run away from their parents, because parents do foolish things out of love for their children. And they don't understand that by doing this they decide their children's life." Sarah wanted to tell them that, but she was afraid. Her mother cried every single night. Why? She didn't quite understand. Perhaps she didn't want to stay in America either. Sarah would get up at night, supposedly to go to the toilet, but she would press her ear to the door of her mother's and father's bedroom.

Time was passing. Bulgaria remained somewhere out there, Gabriel – too. She wanted to get in touch with him, to tell him where she was, to hear his voice. After

some time, she slowly began to learn bits of the language and her parents enrolled her in school. One day, after she got home from school, she went to her parents' small bedroom – her room was much bigger than theirs, because her parents had given her the big room, so that she would feel better. The door creaked unbearably. It was dark. She pulled the curtains and looked around. She saw scattered pictures on the bed. She didn't want to look at them because she would remember, and the memories saddened her. She started putting the photos away one by one without looking at them. She took out the box where her mother kept them – a small wooden Bulgarian box, a single touch of the little thing reminded her that it had once stood in her grandmother's house. In the dresser to the left of the TV. She opened it to put the photos in it. But the box contained envelopes, newspaper cutouts, and letters. She tried to make sense of them, but to no avail. She had to pour everything on the bed and rearrange it. With her peripheral vision she read Gabriel's name on one of the envelopes. She gathered her courage and looked at the envelope on which his name was written. She took it out and saw the date. It had arrived more than three months ago. She opened it and read it.

*Sarah, hello from Bulgaria!*

*As soon as I received your letter, I wanted to write you an answer, but I didn't know what to say. It should be something you'll remember forever. I wanted it to be something that would make you come back. I wanted it to be something to give you strength, wherever you are. But in the end I couldn't come up with anything. I sat in front of the paper and no words came to me. Maybe that's normal. I realized that this way I feel like I'm next to you. I realized that if I started writing, it would be as if I were sending you off at the station. My grandfather once told me how they sent him off at the station when Sofia was bombarded. He remembered his mother waving a handkerchief. After that he never saw her again – neither her nor his father. Well, I wasn't able to send you off. You just disappeared one day. Since then the streets look empty, the dogs have stopped barking, deceived by the juicy bones of everyday life, the clocks have stopped, the traffic-controllers have frozen in place. I lost my sense of direction, I didn't know where was north, where was south – or east or west. The world shattered into pieces, damn it, someone had to put it back in order. I thought nothing would ever be the same. Every day I woke up in a new world, in a new universe, in a new bed, and each time it was worse than the previous day. I knew you were somewhere far away. Maybe this letter will make you sad, but it shouldn't. Because, be sure, one day I will come to you. I hate everyone who forced you to go. I hate them as wholeheartedly as I love you. I don't want to see anyone. This country feels foreign to me, and the city is a desert. I really don't understand why you miss it so much. There is nothing here – the past is one big lie and the future is lost to us. Maybe I sound extremely*

*pessimistic, but that's the reality and I have to accept it. What I wanted to tell you is not to be sad because I'm coming. I've already started learning English and I'm going to apply to an American university. Here, in Bulgaria, everything has gone wrong. Everyone is saying things will get better, but it's not happening. The only positive thing that happened was that we took fourth place in the World Cup. Everything else is a lie. Or at least that's what my father says. He was laid-off or fired. I don't know which one exactly, and they won't tell me. What I'm seeing here disgusts me. Our city is falling apart. Teachers at school don't know where they are. They continue to use the old system without understanding what has happened. I'm telling you all this so you won't be sad about this stupid place. Nothing is happening and nothing will happen here. At school, we learned about the April uprising and we had to read Zahari Stoyanov's "Notes on an Uprising". A very sad book. I learned from it that we always have been good-for-nothings. But at least during his time there was some justice, despite all the lies.*

*It's good that books exist. I read a lot, I read all the time. Maybe if I hadn't met you, I wouldn't love books so much. Now, when I open a book, I feel like I'm with you. That keeps me sane. But I'm also learning many things. Next time, I'll try to send you some books in Bulgarian, but it's a little complicated to send parcels to America.*

*Basically that's it, I'll wait for an answer, and you wait for me. If it's convenient, can you check which universities are close to you, so I can look into them? They say there is this thing called the Internet where you can read everything you need. And there are some chat rooms where you can write to someone and they can answer you. If there is such a thing, I can try to get in touch with you, but for now these are only rumors.*

*I miss you, write to me!*

*Yours, Gabriel*

Sarah didn't know how to react. Whether to feel joy because of the letter or to be angry at her mother, who had hidden it from her. She quickly forgot about her mother. She read the letter again. It seemed that Gabriel had become too mature for his age. He sounded too tormented. What had happened to the people there in just a few years? Someone had told her that the crisis in Bulgaria was very tough, that people stood in lines miles long for bread and milk, they had no cigarettes, but had a lot of problems.

Sarah got excited again when she read the last lines of the letter. She decided to answer.



# Angel IGOV

Angel Igov was born on 3 July 1981 in Sofia. He graduated from First English Language School and Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. He has also studied at the University of Roehampton, London, and at the University of California, Berkeley. At present, he teaches English Literature and Translation in the Department of English and American Studies at Sofia University. He is one of the founders of the Liturne initiative (contemporary Bulgarian authors reading excerpts of their works in open spaces)(2005). Igov was a member of the juries of the VICK Award for Best Bulgarian Novel of the Year (2007), of the Ivan Niklov National Award (2009), of the Elias Canetti National Literary Award (2013) and of the Slaveykov National Award for Lyric Poetry for 2016.

He won the grand prize of the Southern Spring National Contest for debut in fiction for *Road Encounters* (2003), the Rashko Sugarev Contest for his short story “Everything” (2002), the Boyan Penev Award for literary criticism (2005), etc. His collection of stories *Kwas* nominated for the Elias Canetti Award (2006). Igov’s novel *A Short Tale of Shame* won the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation contest for writers and was published in English by Open Letter Books along with co-winner Zachary Karabashliev’s *18% Gray*. His novel *The Meek* was nominated for the Helikon

Award. On 10 June 2016 he received the Hristo G. Danov Award for Bulgarian Fiction for his novel *The Meek*. He is a four-time nominee for the yearly Krastan Dyankov Award for Best Translation bestowed by the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation.

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## *Critical Acclaim for Fine Dust Particles*

“Precise, intellectual prose written with rapt attention to detail, nicely capturing the drama of the ‘80s generation, which was nurtured with the radiation of a catastrophic utopia. From the poisonous Chernobyl rain to the dirty political games in the world today, Angel Igov explores the symptoms of the infection that has spread beyond the confines of the physical world, weaving itself into the fabric of interpersonal relationships.”

*Alek Popov*

“A funny, gripping, yet painful personal story, an illustration of the entire period of the Transition—a mindblowing whirlpool of events that sprinkled us over the city and the entire world like fine dust particles. Kiril, Elitsa and Martin are a few of those specks of dust from our scattered past, which has not actually faded away, but instead keeps swirling our lives around to this day.”

*Vassil Georgiev*





# Fine Dust Particles

*Excerpt / Translated by Annie Dancheva*

**L**ike most other people with a good grasp of a foreign language, especially those in need of a healthy income, my darling daughter Theodora worked in the outsourcing industry. All in all, she spent her days on the phone, explaining to people who lived on the other end of the world where to find the power button of their printing devices. I'm forever baffled by just how many people on this planet cannot find that button and consider it completely appropriate to grab their phones and unleash their indignation straight into the ear of a stranger who, as the cliché goes, was supposedly located somewhere in Bangalore, but, in recent times more often than not, happened to live in Sofia.

What confounded me no less was that for doing this job, along with saying whatever was necessary so as not to have to send a technician over to the home of the disgruntled client, she received a salary much higher than mine. A printer! A button! A red button blinking orange! I wonder what clients felt when they finally managed to press that hallowed button? Agitation, hesitation, fear? Or a well-deserved sense of gratification mingled with a tinge of pride?

There, the perturbed citizen of Frostproof, Florida, takes his glasses off, wipes the beads of sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief and then peers intensely at his printing device which – oh, Lord! – starts purring like a cat, then some cogs and wheels inside click into place with a few charming ticks and out comes the printed e-mail from his cousin Beth, a page that the Frostproof citizen would not really want to read from the screen of his computer because his eyes might hurt, those same water-blue eyes that he had just removed his spectacles from, so he could mop the sweat from his forehead.

And, via the odd, ludicrous mechanisms of the global economy, the fairytalish printer in Frostproof, Florida, has printed, along with the e-mail from the cousin Beth, a brand new green banknote that has embarked on its long journey through various stock-market channels, debt instruments, policies and indexes, so that it could finally arrive at the bank account of my darling Theodora who is about to walk through the glass doors of the empty café of the Polygraphia Office Center any minute now.

Once, in this impressive edifice, a masterpiece of Stalinist architecture, boomed the largest printing house on the Balkan Peninsula, named, in the spirit of the time, after the founder of the Social Democratic Party, although, strictly speaking, he himself was not a printer by profession, rather a follower of his who later turned the Social Democratic Party into the Communist one. Today, as has already become clear, the former

printing house has become an attractive center for banknotes that have been printed elsewhere.

It is probably nice there, inside that massive old building with broad corridors and staircases along which you could arrange an entire brass orchestra. I suppose it is airy. In her current position Theodora still does not have a view of the park across the street, but if she keeps doing her job just as well as she has been so far, she may get it. But just see what kind of café they have made for them down here! An empty one. No wonder it is empty, given the electronic music that comes blaring out of the speakers with such deadly jollity that the stray dogs on the street outside stay as far away from this place as they can.

The people who work in these offices stop by at the café only to grab a homemade sandwich with hummus and finely chopped rings of red pepper, then wait nervously at the bar to get a freshly squeezed kiwi juice with ginger and, having gotten a taste of the transparent multiculturalism of the international juice bar chains, they quickly rush out, worried they might be late for work, but also quite eager to run away as fast as they can from that deafening jollity whose rumble etches deeply into the polygraphic hummus of that gracious community.

Everything is wonderful, but I fail to understand why I keep sitting here. I could as well be waiting for Theodora outside, I'd be better off waiting out there in the hot sunset instead of allowing them do this to my ears. Nevertheless, I keep sitting here, staring idly at the muted TV screen.

The thing is that, unlike the usual case in such places, the muted TV screen isn't transmitting some fashion channel with models on the catwalk, nor is it, per the latest prevailing trend, broadcasting a music channel that obligatorily plays a music different than the one you are actually hearing. But to my greatest astonishment, they are actually airing an interview on our native Omega TV and right at that moment Kiryazov, the new leader of the STIGA<sup>1</sup> Party, is talking, his face solemn and his gelled bangs sticking up.

He's speaking, but, as expected, I can't hear a word because the sound is off. I can only see him open his mouth and look straight into the camera, straight into me, he wants to show me he understands how difficult my life is here in this glass café with the music blasting; he promises me decency and loyalty, he promises countless hummus sandwiches with red pepper. Such a soundless orator he is!

I stare at him dazzled, I can't take my eyes off of the gigantic screen that Kiryazov has filled up with his head, but soon the camera zooms out a little and Kiryazov is

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<sup>1</sup> Literally "enough".

no longer a lone soldier on the screen, now there are some people standing next to him, sweaty people dressed in summer suits who give heavy nods and exude responsibility. I catch a glimpse of the producer who has an affinity for South American dictators, then I catch sight of the newscasters' executive and two or three of the female news anchors, wearing high heels. Who was that man who just flashed by? The frame shifts, now it's only Kiryazov on the screen, but somewhere behind my eyes remains the vague image of a young, burly man with swarthy skin, a chin dimple and something like an offended look in his eyes. I wonder where I have seen him before.

Suddenly, Theodora is sitting by my side. She has come here from the other world, the everyday world that has been temporarily shut out by the soundless orator Kiryazov and the muscle-rousing dance music in the café. But to her it is probably me who has just arrived from that other world as I have been driving in the traffic to come here, I have exchanged spiteful looks with other drivers who changed lanes at the last possible moment without bothering to use their turn signals first. I finally manage to look away from the screen and, as I give her a smile, to my own surprise, I ask: "Has anyone from Frostproof, Florida, ever called you?"



# Deyan ENEV

Deyan Enev was born on August 11, 1960, in Sofia. He graduated from an English language high school and later obtained a degree in Bulgarian Studies from Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. He worked as a journalist for several newspapers, including *Maritsa*, *Novinar*, *Express*, *Otechestven Front*, *Sega* and *Monitor*.

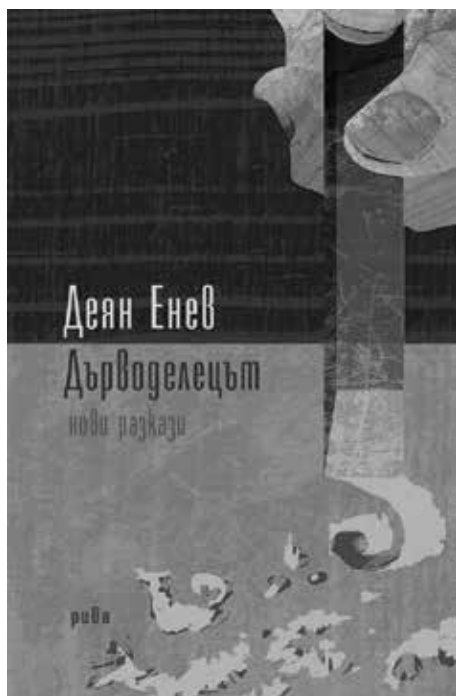
Deyan Enev has over 2,000 journalistic publications and seventeen published books, including a few short story collections: *Readings for the Night Train* (1987), which received the Southern Spring Award for best debut; *Horse Gospel* (1992); *Manhunter* (1994), which received the Annual Award for Fiction from Hristo Botev Publishing House and was translated into Norwegian in 1997; *The Slaughter of the Rooster* (1997); *Heads or Tails* (1999, 2000, 2014), which won the Hristo G. Danov National Award for Fiction and the Annual Award of the Union of the Bulgarian Writers; *Have Mercy on Us, Oh Lord* (2004), which won the Helikon Award for New Bulgarian Fiction; *A Town Named Mendocino* (2009), which won the Milosh Zypkov National Literary Award and was nominated for the Helikon Award; *Seven Christmas Stories* (2009); *The Bulgarian Lad from Alaska. Sofia Stories* (2011); *Hemingway's Grandson* (2013); *Grizzly* (2015); *Maria* (2016); and *The Carpenter* (2017).

## *Critical Acclaim for Deyan Enev*

“The artistic construction of Deyan Enev’s short stories resembles that particular way of sculpturing in which the sculptor doesn’t add, stick or fit things together, but takes the unnecessary material away. The whole short story has turned into a huge ‘but’ amidst the sentence of life.

In his short stories, Deyan Enev manages to achieve a high degree of epic density that usually escapes the contemporary Bulgarian novel. He is an author who hasn’t reflected, described, copied, or imitated, but has discovered ‘a reality which serves as a vehicle for characters and ideas typical of a particular era.’”

*Ventsislav Bozhinov*



# The Carpenter

*Excerpt / Translated by Kalina Todorova*

‘Is not this the carpenter’s son?’

Matthew 13:55

**T**here was old purple moss growing on the north side of the stones in the wall, surrounding the yard, there was water running somewhere, everything was in blossom. The gate was solid and old, the little built-in door opened with a single gentle push and we went in. There were a few buildings inside: spacious, one-story, and the fruits of the carpenter’s labor could be seen everywhere – big logs, polished and turned into pots for plants, all sorts of started but unfinished wooden items, roots modelled into natural sculptures by the light touch of the master’s hand, a deer with antlers, a bear torso, little lambs – one lying and two standing...

The yard was spacious and those pieces of wood were scattered about; some of them had obviously been left there for years and had already turned grey, others showed fresh traces of work. The carpenter was nowhere to be seen, but everything: the trees, the flowers, the growing grass and the soil, was covered in fine sawdust, accumulated during the decades of work, dust that no rain or snow could possibly wash away.

We finally saw him, he hatched out of one of the rooms, looking a bit older than last time, but energetic; his cap was bestrewn with the ash-like sawdust and his cardigan, tattered in places, was hardened by the layers of fine orange chips and turned into armour.

The carpenter was as quietly joyful as we remembered him. This quiet joy didn’t show in the features of his face, but rather in his eyes, in the golden sparks they had. It probably stemmed from his work with wood, because wood is a noble material and ennobles the craftsmen who work with it. But among the sparks there was some dried-up sorrow, which we didn’t remember having seen last time.

He showed us bits and pieces in the yard, then led us into the workshop, which after the yard bathed in the spring sun seemed a little low, somehow dark; there were spoons, bowls, small pitcher-like whistles, dishes, distaffs, crooks; from the ceiling and the beams there were big spider webs hanging, overgrown with wood dust, somehow like yellow beards.

We didn’t ask him about his household, about his wife and son, they didn’t seem to be there anyway.

Then suddenly, the carpenter seemed hurried, he jumped to his feet again and

told us to follow him. We crossed the yard to the fence, he moved the netting away and we stepped out of the yard and into the field adjacent to his house, treading deeply in the moist, bumpy soil with green grass shooting up. He was walking ahead as if pulling a plough, then stopped dead and waved his hand.

And we saw it, we suddenly saw it, only now, as if it had just fallen from above.

Amidst the field there was an enormous tree trunk, the most enormous tree trunk on earth. Lying sideways, it had been burned black – people had obviously tried to hack and hew it into pieces, but it remained whole. We came closer and touched it with our hands. It was hard as a rock. It was huge. Only water from the ocean could have washed it ashore here. Or perhaps it had fallen from the sky like a meteorite.

Standing next to it, the carpenter looked very small. He ran his frayed sleeve over his eyes and waved us away.



# Dimana TRANKOVA

Dimana Trankova (b. 1980) is an archaeologist by education and a journalist by vocation. She has been a part of Vagabond Media since 2006. There she was the managing editor of *Highlights*, *Bulgaria's Airport Magazine*, and of *Go Greece!* travel magazine. Currently she is an editor at *Vagabond*, Bulgaria's English Monthly, where she covers travelling in and outside Bulgaria, history and archaeology.

She is the co-author of several non-fiction books in English and/or Bulgarian on Bulgaria's ethnic, cultural and historical heritage.

Dimana Trankova is the author of two novels.

*The Smile of the Dog* was shortlisted for the 2015 Southern Spring National Award for Debut Authors. In 2017 it was published in French by editions Intervalles as *Le sourire du chien*. For it the translator, Marie Vrinat-Nikolov, won the 2017 Peroto, or Quill, National Literary Award for literary translation from Bulgarian into a foreign language.

Her second novel, *The Empty Cave*, was shortlisted for the 2017 Elias Canetti National Literary Award and for the 2017 Helikon Literary Award.



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# The Empty Cave

*Excerpt / Translated by Ekaterina Petrova*

## Prologue

“**H**ave you been to the border?” he asked. His question – quiet, husky, and forbidden – got absorbed into the darkness and the echo of the other people’s voices, and definitely convinced her that coming here had been a mistake. She should have stayed home tonight. Alone. By herself. On her own with her dreams.

But tonight, she took a shower, got dressed up to go out, put on a little perfume, and called a cab. As usual, she got there neither too early nor too late, around the time when the first guests had already had a couple of drinks and the music was blasting through the front door and spilling down the apartment building’s stairway. She said hello to Zornitsa, got herself a glass of wine, took a little sip, so as not to attract any attention, and tried to find a spot amidst the pointless conversations in the living room.

She did everything as usual. But tonight the wine had a strange taste to it. The second sip made her head spin. The floor shifted beneath her feet, the sweaty bodies around her swayed, their voices rose, then fell to a whisper – to the silence of a desert where only the wind remained; of a dusty room where only spiders lived.

She wiped the sweat off her brow.

She couldn’t leave now. It was too early and Zornitsa would think something was wrong, she’d ask what was going on, and she’d give her that look.

She squeezed through the swarm of people and went out on the balcony. She leaned against the railing and put the palms of her hands on the cold cement, where pots of geraniums were kept in the summer. Low clouds, red from the reflection of the city lights, crowded the autumn sky. Cleansed by the rains, the air in the capital was almost tasty.

And then, an unfamiliar man’s voice asked, “Are you okay?”

She hadn’t noticed him. He was leaning against the railing in the corner, away from the dim light coming from the living room – a tall, stooping figure with a dark face and arms crossed over his chest. For a second, she thought he was smoking and this brief and foolish idea made her sad.

“Well, I don’t know,” she replied, shook her glass, and smelled its contents. “But the wine definitely tastes strange today.”

“Mine does, too. And I thought I was imagining things,” he said with such astonishment that she couldn’t help but laugh and say, “Cheers, then.”

Both of them took a sip, frowned, and agreed that the wine really did taste strange.

He mumbled something about how out here in the cold at least the walls weren't swaying and she conceded. They had another sip, then turned their backs to the music and the other conversations, and started talking. It was an innocent exchange of the kind people usually had when they came over to Zornitsa's. A little bit about themselves, about their jobs, about movies, and other such nonsense. Had she ever been to the Empty Cave? No, she'd only heard about it. And had he? Yes, his workplace had organized a trip once. It must have been interesting? Yes, very much so.

They soon got to the borders of what was safe to talk about. They exchanged glances and fell silent. A gust of wind brought them closer together and they almost touched. He smelled strange. Like a man. A thick, forgotten smell, which unsettled her, although he – as well as the cold and the silence – was still preferable to the stifling hysteria on the inside. Yes, indeed, she thought to herself and yawned.

“Feeling sleepy already?”

“I'm usually in bed by this time.”

She fell silent, startled by the ease with which she'd almost told him that she'd been spending most of her life sleeping lately, as well as by the possibility he might ask, “How come?”

But he changed the subject.

“Some more wine?”

“Sure,” she said and shivered, since he was already on his way into the room and the evening seemed colder without him.

He came back with an entire bottle of wine and poured some into her glass with a flourish, so it overflowed and spilled onto her fingers. He let out a curse while she laughed and licked her fingers. They leaned against the railing in their previous spot and stared at the yellow eyes of the apartment buildings across the little neighborhood park, which peeked through the black trees.

They said nothing more but smirked, like two kids sharing a secret, when the music stopped and, following the brief silence soaked with the awkwardness of interrupted conversations, this year's version of that old tune about the traveller who gets a rose as a keepsake blasted into the night. It was a catchy popular song, the kind you hear your whole life, that you can't help but sing along to every time. And so, there they were, Zornitsa's guests, already bellowing at the top of their lungs in the living room, their loud voices overpowering the original melody.

The man on the balcony didn't start singing. He poured them both some more wine and asked, directing the question not so much to her as to the prickly net of branches in front of them, “Have you been to the border?”

Nobody ever spoke about the border just like that. Nobody.

“I haven’t,” she said and headed towards the living room, but his desperate, “I have,” tripped her up and made her take a look at him. His damp face was glistening in the darkness – it was the face of a man who was aware he was about to do something stupid but couldn’t stop himself.

And he didn’t.

“Just shortly before the Evolution, I wound up in one of those villages – the kind that used to be really vibrant before the Second World War, but after it ended and border control was tightened, they started to get depopulated, and then completely died out after the Evolution. You know the kind I mean?”

“No, I don’t,” she mumbled, then entered the safe mugginess of the living room, merged into the sweaty crowd, and joined in on the last verse of the song about the traveller and the rose, but fell silent just a few lyrics later, when she felt a heavy hand on her shoulder.

“Come outside,” the familiar voice murmured, husky and anxious.

“No!” she screamed in a whisper.

Any time now, *They* were going to catch wind of the forbidden conversation (*They* could always sense these things) and *They* would come and take her and everyone else in the apartment away (except for Zornitsa, of course), because everyone here deserved to be taken away.

“Come. You’re attracting attention,” he took hold of her wrist and led her towards the night and the wind, and she followed him because the song was dying down around them and the others were already watching the two of them – her, the frightened woman, and him, the frightened man.

When they found themselves out on the balcony and on their own, she tried to protest, to convince him not to speak, to stay quiet, just as he’d stayed quiet until moments ago. Honestly, she tried. But he embraced her, and his arms and words were scary and stronger than her, and she stayed with them, in them, and heard the story she wasn’t supposed to hear.

“Over there, at the border, an old shepherd once told me about the woman who filled the hole. It happened a few years after the communists came to power. At that time, the old shepherd was still a boy and he was herding a small flock of sheep, which grazed up in the hills,” he briefly fell silent. “Over there, along the border, there are these rolling hills,” he added and the quiet dreaminess of his voice awoke in her a memory of air that squeaked with cleanliness, of blue skies and soft hills, of deserted dirt roads and withering grass that threw long shadows onto the dust at sunset.

“One day, when he was in the border zone with his sheep, the boy encountered a woman. A strange woman. A woman from the city. Obviously out of place. The woman approached. She told him she was hungry. The boy got scared, tossed her the food he’d brought

for lunch, and ran away before the border guards could show up.”

“And then, he went to them and turned her in,” Maya said.

“He may have turned her in,” his coarse sweater scratched her cheek, just as the sunburnt grass had scratched her legs once, among the hills under the boundless sky. “But he didn’t do it straightaway.”

Yes, that must have been what happened. He had turned her in, but not straightaway. The thought was somehow comforting. Her face nuzzled up against his chest; as she breathed in his scent, she thought about the way the fields smell when it’s late autumn and it’s cold but the sun is still there to warm the grass, the bare bushes, and the hard clumps of earth, and to promise to the world that nothing lasts forever. Even the winter, which is coming and which will kill everything that isn’t strong enough – even the winter doesn’t last forever.

“The next day, the boy brought some food to the woman and took her to an abandoned cave monastery. That’s where she told him her story. She was Jewish. From the capital. Before the war, she’d fallen in love with a German man who had come here for work. They got married. When our government started discussing the Law for Protection of the Nation, the two of them realized that hard times were coming and left the country. He found her a place to live in a neutral territory and came back here to take care of some formalities. He never returned. The war ended, the changes here were underway, years went by, but there was no trace of him. Finally, she decided to come here and look for him. Illegally.”

His hands squeezed her. It hurt.

“She got caught before she could even cross the border. They took all her belongings and raped her. When they got tired of her, they let her cross over to our side.”

“What was her name?”

“I don’t know. The shepherd didn’t remember. Perhaps he never knew.”

He swallowed and tensed up. Maya snuggled up against his shoulder. *Come on, she thought, go ahead. I know the nastiest part is still to come. I know you want to tell me it. I also want you to.*

“On the third day, when the shepherd went back to the monastery, the woman was gone. He looked for her but only found the little pouch, in which he’d brought her some food, in some shrubs. And then, tales of a captured saboteur woman started going around the village. She was raped again, like she had been on the other side of the border. But this time, they didn’t let her go. They made her fill the hole.”

Once, when the word “journalist” still used to mean something and she’d used it in reference to herself, with both pride and self-irony, Maya had written about the would-be escapees from the Eastern Bloc who had been killed in the border zone and buried in anonymous graves. But that was long ago. Before the Evolution. Before They showed up and the border appeared, and before so many other things became forbidden.

“The hole,” she uttered, feeling the emptiness through her thoughts, her lungs, her throat, her lips.

Until now, she’d never realized how hollow the word “hole” sounded.

“Border jargon from back in the day,” he said. “As in, ‘He filled the hole. She filled the hole. They filled the hole.’”

“And nobody knows where she was buried.”

“Nobody. But you know what the worst part of it is?”

“The shepherd told you the story with some kind of sadistic pleasure,” she said, because that was what usually happened.

“Yes, he did. But that wasn’t the worst part,” his whisper melted away and rather than hearing the words that followed, she sensed them through the vibrations of his body. “To him, this story wasn’t that important. He only thought of it when I explicitly asked him if he’d ever seen anyone trying to cross the border illegally and escape the regime. And it wasn’t even the first story that came to his mind.”

“What else did he tell you?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t remember.”

They stood there, clutching each other, pressed by history, by memories, by the shared fear that they’d made a mistake.

“And here I was, thinking you’d already left,” Zornitsa chirped from the direction the door. She was smiling, as usual.

“Well, I . . . we,” Maya broke away from the stranger’s embrace.

“We came out here to get some fresh air,” he added.

“It really is pleasant, isn’t it,” Zornitsa tilted her head to the side, since she thought that doing so made her look young and innocent. “The guest bedroom is unoccupied.”

“Actually, we were just . . .” Maya began, but he cut her short.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Zornitsa chirped and went away.

“What a horrible woman,” he mumbled when they were on their own again. “Just horrible.”

“If she’s so horrible, then what are you doing here?”

“I’d rather have *Them* think everything is all right with me.”

He slightly turned her towards him and kissed her.

He wasn’t a good kisser, but that didn’t matter. He smelled good and his scent made her warm inside, and that was enough.

“Come on,” he said and reached out his hand.

“Come on,” she caught his hand and followed him.

The guest bedroom was unoccupied, indeed.



# Evgeniya IVANOVA

Evgeniya Ivanova is a professor of political science at New Bulgarian University, with a special interest in Balkan studies and ethnic policy. She is the author of dozens of academic publications both in Bulgaria and abroad. Her first literary works, collections of short stories, appeared in the 1980s. In 2008, her first novel *Photo Shop Stoyanovich* won the Vick Foundation's Novel of the Year Award. Her latest novel, *Cursed Novel*, continues the narrative begun there.

“Evgeniya Ivanova has established herself as a contemporary European writer not only in the structure of her text, but also in her ideology: she shows how in the 19th century tolerance towards differences –cultural, religious, social, gender, and so forth, even visions of an international Jewish conspiracy or an infatuation with nihilism do not contradict national identity; society’s elites are cosmopolitan despite the manipulations the masses are subject to. In that sense *Cursed Novel* carries an important warning from the past for today’s left and right-wing radicals, a message that must be heard. One could even say it must be heard urgently.”

*Georgi Lozanov, Kultura*

## Bibliography

2017. *Cursed Novel*, a novel

2013. *The Constantinople Plan*, novel

2012. *Deafening White*, collection of novellas

2008. *Photo Shop Stoyanovich*, novel, Novel of the Year Award of the VICK Foundation

1986. *The Sea in My Grandpa's Paintings*, collection of short stories

1982. *The Seaside Out of Season*, collection of short stories

## Synopsis

An adventurer with an unbridled imagination who invents a story of his own is the protagonist of Evgeniya Ivanova's new novel. The events, which take place in the end of the 19th century, galloping from London and Paris through Belgrade and Sofia to Istanbul and Petersburg, are not the background of the plotline's intrigue, but rather its consequence. The question is will the intrigue continue generating galloping events well into the centuries to follow?





# Cursed Novel

*Excerpt / Translated by Annie Dancheva*

EVELINA:

**A**fter Melek passed away, my brother started writing more often than before. Was he seeking another mother for himself, I wondered? He recounted how after being persecuted throughout the whole of Europe because of the Jews' intrigues (although I believe his debts were to blame), he finally managed to find shelter in Mother Russia, in the emperor's lap. He had found her—his new mother!

He had even started signing his letters with 'Vladimir Andreevich', but sometimes he added 'Osman Bey', especially in the books he wrote about the Orient where the Turkish name, he said, lent more authenticity to the narrative. Otherwise he had at that point converted to Orthodox Christianity. I have to admit that in this regard he had outdone me completely: I changed my religious beliefs just two times, while he changed his twice that number!

It was precisely religious conversion that he intended to put on center stage in his future novel. It was going to focus on the Bulgarians (a people closely linked to the Serbians) who were forced to convert to Islam to avoid being slaughtered altogether. He said he was entirely consumed by that idea, and he pictured vast fires illuminating a mountain and blood, lots of blood. He had even fabricated some papers to make the story sound more credible. The book was going to be a quick sell, he believed, as people loved blood and were stunned at the cruelty of the massacres which, in Europe, was deemed an intrinsic characteristic of the Turkish people. That novel could well instigate war, and the sooner that happened, the better!

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DECOURDEMANCHE:

Melek seemed to be happy in Paris. She spoke a lot of the Pasha and the birth of their love here, in our Turkish embassy where she found refuge from the persecution of her husband (ex-husband) and his family. I noticed that she preferred to spend her time lost in her memories instead of going out and roaming the streets of present-day Paris . . . Indeed, they were crammed with people, an absolute crush really, a racket – it was the World's Fair.

She was afraid she might stumble upon the Sultan, she said, who had also ar-

rived to see the Exposition and who had started voicing his judgments on the loose lifestyle of the French people everywhere he went. The newspapers spread his indignation at the balls, where men held other men's wives in their arms with dulled passion, at industry, which he considered to be just a means for earning money, and mostly at the fact that the ruler had to obey his subjects as though he was their slave. The only thing he liked was the Empress, Eugénie—he wished her to pay him a visit in Constantinople at all costs.

The Russian tsar also appeared in the city, but his people made an attempt on his life and he hastily left.

As for Aishe, she was displeased with everything: with her French classes, with the reduced amount of food (no meat, it was the time of the fast), with the fact that she had to stay indoors, just as she had to in her father's harem. Or at least that was what her mother said—she, as I already mentioned, kept silent for the most part and looked at me with those large luminous black eyes that sent chills down my spine . . .

The abbot initiated her into the Catholic Faith right after the fast was over. She looked dazzlingly beautiful: raven-black hair covered with white mousseline, a pale face with moisture trickling down her cheeks—was it the water she had been baptized with or her own tears, I never found out . . .

The guests (her godmother, a Polish princess, and a few nuns, close associates of Abbot Boris) were weeping.

Later on, when Aishe started having those tantrums, she herself called her baptism ceremony a “comedy”.

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EVELINA:

Friederich hasn't inherited only our mother's crooked smile. I think he also has her madness running in his veins. I remember her fluttering from Paris to Brussels and then to London (thank heaven she didn't stop in at Venice), for she had been falsely framed for the murder of some Duchess. The Duchess was alive and well, but Melek, however, kept hiding from the police as though she had really committed the murder. Thus, she fell victim to all sorts of swindlers who wanted to get to the Pasha's inheritance through her and her daughter. She was even suspicious of Aishe's third husband, that nice French man Decourdemanche who wanted to publish her book about the harem and who gave her money for that very reason.

And then he jumped out the window.

My brother himself isn't totally deprived of certain suicidal inclinations, either.

I always burst out laughing just thinking of how he had pronounced himself dead just so he could lay the blame on the Jews. Isn't that the work of a true madman?

I can also recall – when he was still an orthodox Muslim – he joined the ranks of the Cretan Revolt against the Turks and even ran around London to collect money for arms. It's a good thing that right when he was about to lead a battalion into a partisan war on the island, the revolt failed.

Not to forget his intention to fight in the American Civil War. He had been introduced to Lincoln himself, or so he claimed . . . He said he had a plan for a lightning-fast victory over the South, but Lincoln got assassinated and the plan was aborted. And then he went on to say that he no longer held any interest either in the North or the South. In fact, he loved the East . . .

Don't they say that normal people go to live in the west and only the mad ones move to the east . . .



# Georgi TENEV

Georgi Tenev is a writer, screenwriter and playwright. He is the author of the novels *Party Headquarters* (winner of the Vick Foundation Novel of the Year Award, 2007), *Christo, Castro* and *Free Love, Mr. M.*, and the short-story collection *Holy Light* (winner of a PEN Translation Fund Grant).

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## Synopsis

*Bulgarian Roses* is a dark, criminally mysterious, relentless novel, which presents the atmosphere in Bulgaria at the beginning of the 21st century. Violence, the appropriation of capital and identity, power struggles. It is the story of the fate of intellectuals in the ruthless world of the powerful, the brutal and the rich, of the shattering of illusions of innocence. A story about unachievable love and treachery in the name of success, fame and money. The author challenges several generations, makes a dark prediction of a future of terror and political revenge and forces us to face the ominous question: WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE CHILDREN?



## Bulgarian Roses

*Excerpt / Translated by Valentina Milanova*

*23 May, morning*

“**W**hen forced into deadlock, one feels the perverse charm of despair. Almost without investing any energy, in a completely economical way, despair could lead to such extremity that neither heroism nor fanaticism cause”.

Liya closes the book. She has never understood why her father reads such things, she has never liked any of the books which he strews about the house. Liya closes the thick hard covers and places the book on the table by the toilet seat, strains her stomach one more time. She gets up, wipes her ass, flushes the toilet, the lid of the Japanese toilet closes, water gushes like a waterfall in a cave somewhere under her feet. She washes up in front of the mirror, fixes her hair, throws the cotton towel in the bamboo basket, uses her teeth to tear off the chewing gum, which she earlier stuck to the mirror, opens the door and goes out.

*23 May, evening*

A party at the White House. The most beautiful neighbourhood, at the foot of the mountain. The garden is part of the old pine wood, which goes up the slopes and disappears into the night. The city lights are distant. The noise, the traffic and the dirt do not reach these parts. The house is a quotation, a work of architecture, imported from another country and maybe another continent. The big terrace transfuses into a grand green lawn with a regular geometric shape. The terrace creates an optical illusion, as if hanging loosely above the city view. The enormous living-room peeks through high glass doors at the trimmed lawn. The young man with the curly hair is dressed like a barman. The two girls stand upright in the middle of the elevated platform. A TV and some tall spherical speakers are there. The lights are on, an abundance of bulbs and light. The three figures dissolve into the space, which is divided into two levels with a half-a-meter difference in height, with a few abstract sculptures on pedestals in the lower part. The furniture is oval. The ceiling reflects the light of the diffuser lamps hidden in the corners, and looks transparent, as though above the room there was frosted glass.

From the outside, the place looks like a standard design picture in a photography advertising magazine – figures in a big living-room, a young man with curly hair,

a high-cheek-boned Apollo, one could not say if he is cleanly shaved or if there is light stubble on his cheeks and chin, above the shirt and the bow tie. He is by the door, the two young girls – Liya and her friend – are opposite him. They look like carelessly dressed models, one is unhealthily skinny and the other is thickset and frank. They look small next to the giant furniture, which is a real crossroads of sofas and armchairs. The style is that of some Vienna constructivist or some follower of his. To say more about the girls, taking a closer look: both are teenagers and wear heavy make-up. Their muscles strain from keeping their balance.

They have a bold look, stare at Curly unfocusedly. They have dug their heels deep into the carpet, stretching out their legs and arms provocatively, and are holding to each other. They pretend to be drunk or drugged, or maybe they really are. They speak huskily in curt voices. They interrogate the barman. Does he like the house? They point to the abstract sculptures on top of the pedestals. Does he know what that is? Art, sculpture. Does he like the two of them, that's what they want to know. Curly pushes at the cart, hurries to turn his back to them and to leave the room. The White House is not exactly white in colour, but that is the feeling it gives. The doors to the corridor are frosted, a whitish continuation of the milky ceiling. The house is expensively furnished, to the last detail, including the door knobs. There are a lot of doors in this lobby, on every side. In this living-room, which is the heart of the second residential floor of the White House. Somewhere down the dinner is taking place, the party. Curly hurries to get there, he's escaping. Wait a minute!

“Have you been raped?” Liya asks.

The two giggle, fall on one of the sofas, and kick up their feet, rolling around.

“Do me!” screams her friend.

“Come on!” screams the other one. “Do me up a cocktail!”

“It is time for me to go,” he answers.

“Pour me a cocktail, barman!” Liya shouts and roars with laughter.

“Stay!” she commands. “Stay here!”

Curly will slip away. He is close to the door and the two of them are too slow.

“I must go serve your parents. The guests are probably waiting,” he looks at Liya. “Ma'am...”

Liya is suffocating with laughter, he calls her “Ma'am”. He's so sweet! Her friend agrees, he is sweet.

“My name is Mina, Curly”, she cried to him. “My name is Mina.” She gets up and catches up with him, she kisses him on the lips.

Liya stretches out her arm and points at them.

“Son of a bitch, he's blushing!”

The curly youth pulls away, but her friend keeps her arms on his shoulders. Then he goes out, pushing the cart.

“He’ll be back,” Mina concludes curtly.

Liya is mumbling, repeating her words with effort: he’ll be back, he’s staff... The girl says something more, her tongue gets tangled up, she rolls off the sofa and falls on the floor. Mina stoops, gets her up, and slaps her face. Everything looks almost normal in the enormous living-room. One could not say whether they are pretending or they really are drunk or drugged. Looked at from afar, the picture in the design magazine is a still life painting. Figures no longer move, the two teenagers have disappeared behind the sofa’s backrest, behind the empora with the speakers. The broken line of the living-room helps cover all horizontal bodies. The details remind one of the style of the building, an architect’s house. The author of the design and owner of the house receives her guests on the first floor. Her name is Dora Popova.

The guests’ cars are parked in the alleys. The dinner is taking place on the first floor, Curly arranges bottles on the bar. Following a vertical line, precisely above his head, is the living-room of the residential level. The two girls are there, an hour has passed since he left them. Liya is just past seventeen, she is the daughter of the owner. Mina is seventeen, her maid of honour, who now waves her hand in front of her face. “Get a grip on yourself! How many pills did you take?”

Liya makes the victory sign with her fingers. Her friend stands up, dangles some car keys on her finger, showing them with a tempting smile. She has stolen the keys from one of the guests downstairs. No one would know if the two of them went out for a little jaunt.

“We must not leave the house!” Liya says. Of course, as Mina knows very well, Liya is not allowed to leave the house. There are, let’s say, four or five meters between Liya and the door. Ten more meters of stairs and corridors, through the garden and to the gate, leading to the driveway. At most, there are ten meters more to the city road. It is no more than the length of a swimming pool, but even that distance cannot be covered without permission. Paradise, Liya presumes, is where she would arrive when she leaves this place. When she’ll be able to go out whenever she wants.

“We must not leave the house!” she repeats.

After that though, she gets up and starts for the door. Her feet get tangled up and she falls down somewhere in the middle of the living-room. She tries to go on, tries to take her clothes off, her dress which is hindering her. She wants to stand up. She staggers, knocks down a shelf full of albums; books and magazines are scattered. We must not leave the house, she thinks. Her friend smiles, makes a “just a little” sign. As much as it looks like temptation, abuse or trickery, maybe it isn’t. Mina wants to take the girl out



at least for a while.

“Okay,” Liya nods in slow motion. “You have to drive.”

That’s obvious Mina will have to drive the car. Liya cannot stand on her feet, she prefers to lie on the floor. Mina tries to pick her up. The two giggle.

“But only in the garden. We will drive only in the garden. We must not go out.”

Her friend examines some disk that has fallen out amidst the strewn albums and magazines. She attempts to read the label on the disk, but she doesn’t understand it.

“What’s this?”

Liya crawls on all fours.

“What does it say?” Mina shows her the box.

Liya stares at the label. Handwritten words in printed letters, black felt-tip pen. She looks at her friend, not focused. “You’re asking what *snuff* is?”

“Snuff?” Mina wrinkles her nose.

“Don’t you know?” Liya is shocked.

She collapses again on the sofa armrest, her tights wrinkle above her calves.

“You don’t know what *snuff* is? Snuff is a movie with violence and death, and the violence and death happen for real. Okay? Someone really dies. Okay?”

Mina still doesn’t understand.

“They take someone,” Liya gestures to show, “they lie to him that they’re filming a movie, with a script. But then they do everything for real. They rape the chick. They kill the dude. If he leaves the house, you know?” She turns, looks at the door where the barman left. “Let’s take him too, eh?”

“Who, that son of a bitch?” her friend grins.

Liya points into space.

“Him, he’s cool”.

Mina raises her arms, stretches them above her head. Let’s say that that could not be seen so well from the window. She lifts her blouse up. Her breasts are naked, she’s not wearing a bra.

“Only I am cool!” Mina shouts and shows her body.

Liya stares blankly at the door.

“Where did he go?”

Mina lets the blouse fall down, she kneels by the softened girl.

“You’ve taken a lot, you’ve really taken too much. Someone really dies.”

Liya’s friend didn’t get what snuff was that night, no matter how Liya explained it. And how in a snuff movie they abduct someone or just deceive him that they’re filming a normal movie, a piece of fiction, but in the end everything happens for real. The rape, the murder. Mina listened to the explanation, but it only convinced all her more

that Liya had taken too many pills.

After that the girls are by the car, on the narrow long parking lot by the driveway on the north side of the house. The road is gravel, stout grass is planted between the grated cement slabs, withstanding the car tires and pushing its way between the little round stones. The two of them have taken their shoes off and are sneaking around bare-foot, as if someone would hear them. There they are, by the car. They press the buttons of the remote control, wrestle for the keys, the lights of the car go on and off. They get inside, the key is in the starter, the engine ignites. Mina is in the driver's seat. There are two cars in front of them, the manoeuvre must be skilful. To the right is the hedge.

Liya stretches her leg to the pedal, she doesn't pay attention to the stick shift, the handle scratches her skin below the knee. She finally reaches the accelerator and presses it to the maximum, the car speeds up. Her friend stands up, waves her hands through the sun roof on the top. The car is shaking, speeds up to the limit, but stays in neutral with the handbrake on. Liya moves to the driver's seat, grasps the steering wheel, turns it sideways. Her friend bangs with her hand on the ceiling, spurring the car on like a horse. They are both shouting, but the roar of the engine drowns their voices. The car does not move, and better so. Liya pulls the key out of the starter and places it in again, the lights go off, then on again. Finally the alarm goes off. Liya slips out and falls down as she opens the door. She gets up, staggers, breaks into laughter. Suddenly she bends down, points at something underneath the car. Charlie, it's Charlie! The dog that ran away today. Here it is, it was here and disappeared again. Mina climbs out of the sun roof and jumps on the hood. The alarm stops and then starts squealing again. Mina looks around for the dog, shouts after it, if she had indeed seen a dog in the darkness.

"Run, Charlie, go chase the mutts!"

She dashes to the alley, buries her hands in the thick cypress and disappears into the bushes. Then she appears on top of the stone fence behind the hedge.

Liya catches up with her, waves her hands. The two jump over the fence. A splash of water can be heard. It is clear that Liya's friend doesn't know at all how to drive a car. Now her body is naked in the pond on the other side of the hedge, behind the cypress. Not entirely naked, she's wearing her underwear and a T-shirt. The fall in the water was not intended, Liya is dressed too, though the water only reaches her waist. The car alarm is on and loud, voices are coming from the house. Other cars, parked in the alley by the house, are loud too. Such things do happen, there's no need for panic, the invisible guards of the White House are not worried. There are cameras everywhere, above the hedge, above the alley. A glass eye is looking from the corner of the building to the cars, and another camera, pointed the other way, to the exit of the narrow open parking lot.



# Hristo KARASTOYANOV

He was born February, 22, 1950, in Topolovgrad. He has worked as a newspaper editor, he was the director of the Puppet Theater in Yambol and also worked there as a playwright.

He graduated from the University of Plovdiv, specializing in Bulgarian language and literature. In 1981 he made his debut with the *Cracked Asphalt*, a collection stories, which won the Southern Spring Prize for best debut in Haskovo (1982). His novel, *Autopia: The Other Way to Hell* was one of five new Bulgarian novels nominated in the first edition of the Vick Foundation Novel of the Year Contest (2003). He has been awarded first prize in the unpublished novel contest of Razvitie Corporation (for the novel *Death Is of Preference*), he has won the award of the Bulgarian Writers' Union for Notes on Historical Naiveté, 1999; the Golden Chain short-story award from *Trud* newspaper, the national Chudomir award for humorous story, etc.

In 2012, the Dittrich Berlin publishing house published the trilogy *Cuckoo's Yarn* (*Teufelszwirn*, Roman in drei Büchern, Dittrich Verlag GmbH), later that year he won the Bulgarian Helikon Bookstore Award for his novel *The Name*. For the novel *The Same Night Awaits Us All* he won the same award in 2014. This novel was been adapted into the play *Geo*, performed in

the Ivan Vazov National Theater, directed by Ivan Dobchev. He won the 2014 Pencho's Oak Award and the national 2015 Elias Canetti Prize for *The Same Night Awaits Us All*. The novel is going to be published by the Open Letter Books, Rochester, USA (2018)

The Bulgarian movie *Follow Me* (2013) was based on an adaptation of his stories; the director was Docho Bodzhakov. Hristo Karastoyanov is well-known as a journalist – his articles have been published in a numerous Bulgarian political and literature newspapers and magazines.

He is married, and has a son and grandchildren. He lives in Yambol, Bulgaria.

## Synopsis

After his novel *The Same Night Awaits Us All* about political struggles in 1920s Bulgaria won multiple national awards, now Hristo Karastoyanov has turned his focus to the time when we were living like doppelgangers of ourselves in his new book *Postscript*.

A missed New-Year's eve train, which leads to a meeting between four men, brings back memories of their friendships and their betrayals. It takes them back to years of tormented love and casual misgivings, intentions and disappointments. *Postscript* revives the memory of the political upheavals of 1968 and 1989, and the events that have marked our lives, which we mistakenly think we have forgotten.



## Postscript

*Excerpt / Translated by Izidora Angel*

Fehim knew more about Botev than me and Stoyan. He knew more than even Belcho did, and Belcho knew everything. It was Fehim who told us, for instance, that the raven in *that* poem of Botev's wasn't a cursed bird, but a fated bird, in other words, a bird, which had doom and odious curses thrown its way. But the meaning got watered down over the years, and with it, half of Bulgarian poetry.

He said all this forty-three years ago, in the spring of sixty-six, when the Department of Education just so happened to pick our class to host that year's last open lit lesson and the room was teeming with educators from the entire district: like hapless penguins, disgruntled by life in their drab black suits. It was only natural that Spiridonova would choose precisely him to quiz at the blackboard—she'd never given him less than a perfect mark. "And the difference between cursed and fated is from here to eternity," explained Fichkata from the blackboard. "It is one thing to be cursed, and quite another to be fated..." The penguins exchanged baffled whispers. Comrade Spiridonova went pale, but nevertheless asked why he thought that, since "Botev," she said, "did not intend to rhyme the line about the raven..." "Not true," Fehim objected evenhandedly. "In the original, the first verse is completely different from what it looks like now, Comrade Spiridonova. It does not in fact say 'Motherland, dear' it says, 'My mother dear, Motherland sacred,' 'And you, O Raven, bird fated.' He turned back to the blackboard, took the chalk, wrote "sacred" and "fated" and triumphantly underlined them. "There's the rhyme!" The penguins up against the wall were now completely scandalized, but unfazed, he simply clapped his hands to get the chalk off. "What it comes down to, Comrade Spiridonova, is that even back then someone—someone who did not give a crap—took the liberty of editing Botev's words. Now we're just finishing what that person started. With time, the difference between the two words has been effaced, and then the word 'cursed' began to be used as a way to describe someone bad, evil, mordant, and fated took the place of cursed. The first was desemanticized, and the second, well it just disappeared..." Spiridonova was on the brink of a lonely swoon, yet she still somehow managed to indicate she'd had enough and he ought to take a seat. But there was no turning back now for Fehim. He said Botev had been a genius, not an idiot, and that in the piece "The Hanging of Vassil Levsky," it isn't the eponymous hero who was swinging from the gibbet with a force so mighty. "Botev meant something else entirely!" he declared. "His brilliant 'with a force so mighty' is about the winter! "With a force so mighty, the winter croaks its evil song..." "The winter!" he said, "it is the winter who croaks with

a mighty force! When a sentence carries over from one verse into the next, it is called an enjambment.

“Hristo Botev,” he went on, “was a real intellectual, and we have no right, ninety years after his death, to read him in such unsophisticated ways.”

Spiridonova’s bewilderment came to a head: she turned around, grabbed the sponge and desperately wiped off those same two words—fated and sacred—and again asked him to sit down. This time she left his stint up at the blackboard ungraded.

In the small break between classes Stoyan dragged Fehim to the toilets and demanded to know what the hell he’d been thinking. “Why don’t you stick to mandatory lit, asshole?” he hissed. “Where did you come up with this bullshit?” “Stoyan, my friend,” Fichkata laughed back, “Don’t worry about it! The raven is a fated bird, unlike Lileto, who’s just evil... The difference, my man, is in the music.” Stoyan shrugged that he didn’t give two shits about the music or whether Lileto is cursed or fated or just evil.

Fichkata looked at him and sighed.

“You’re not wrong, either,” he said, “You’re not wrong.”

“Don’t tell me I’m not wrong! I know I’m right!” Stoyan wouldn’t let it go. “What has Spiridonova ever done to you to justify your embarrassing her in front of those spiteful penguins? It’s the *word* that’s been desemanticized! There is no semantics in Bulgaria! Semantics is a capitalist notion—all we have to hang our hats on here is social realism. Did you somehow miss the look on their faces when you dropped that *desemanticized*? Now they’ll blame it all on her. Have you any clue what they’ll do to her, smartass? They’ll tear her apart. Semantics! I’m surprised you didn’t drop something about behaviorism too, to really put the last nail in her coffin!”

“Behaviorism has nothing to do with Botev,” Fehim calmly offered.

“Idiot!” Stoyan groaned but saw no point in continuing the other’s torture.

We never found out whether they did tear her apart or not, but the truth is that for the entire month after, until the end of the term, Spiridonova walked around like a wilted flower. She never asked Fehim up to the board again, though she still somehow managed to convince the principal and those guys from the Department of Education to recognize the perfect marks she’d given him over the last three years of high school, and she even got him out of having to take the mandatory final lit exam. Fichkata felt almost insulted. While everyone was consumed with jealousy over it, he walked around complaining how all the cheat sheets he’d made would go to waste.

Seven years later, in the warm autumn of seventy-three, after he graduated summa cum laude and got hired at that same high school—not as an intern or something of the sort, but as a teacher—Fehim invited her to attend his inaugural lecture on Bulgarian Literature. Spiridonova would retell the story of how she’d been certain he’d

again lecture everyone about Botev, but, instead, he'd spoken on Ivan Vazov's "Kocho". "What do you make of this, students?" he'd asked at the end. "Did Vazov really turn his back on God, was he blasphemous, a theomachist, had he become a heretic and an antichrist to have written this strange and altogether unexpected verse? 'As God above gazed down through the smoke, thick and muffled, and looked on, silent and unruffled,'" he recited. "What, in your opinion, is Vazov trying to say here?" The class was silent. But so was Fehim. He waited. Spiridonova felt as though the silence was so thick, you could hear the scratch of a pen... Belcho smirked, what else would they do but sit quietly, those poor pubescent boys, and those girls, no doubt so aroused by the sight of their cool, young teacher with the Alain Delon eyes, all on the threshold, surely, of a dramatic epidemic of unrequited love.

"With those lady-killer eyes of yours you could be analyzing Little Red Riding Hood, and they'd still gaze at you like you were shitting gold coins," said Belcho.

"Don't joke about that stuff," Fehim cut him off.

"You're right!" Belcho apologized immediately. "It wasn't funny. What I wanted to say is that I'd heard from Comrade Spiridonova how headspinningly elegant your style was, and that it must have been impossible for the kids to miss just how different you are from those bloated penguins..."



# Ina VALCHANOVA

Ina Valchanova is the author of the novel *The Sinking of Sozopol*, which was nominated for the Razvitie Corporation competition in 2006. The screenplay based on the novel, which she wrote together with director Kostadin Bonev, won the dramaturgy prize at the Golden Rose Festival in Varna. Her second novel *The Pig's Notes* was nominated for the Helikon Prize in 2013. In April 2016, the manuscript of her latest novel, *Breakdown Island* won the grand prize in the Razvitie literary competition.

Ina graduated from Sofia University in Bulgarian philology. She began work at the Bulgarian National Radio on the Hristo Botev station, initially as a journalist in the Culture Bureau, then as a dramaturge in the Radio Theater. She works on the literary writings of many prominent Bulgarian writers and dramaturges, as well as with translated works adapted for radio.



## Bibliography

*The Sinking of Sozopol* – 2007, Ciela

*The Pig's Notes* – 2013, Ergo

*Breakdown Island* – 2016, Razvitie Corporation

## Synopsis

What do we call a “breakdown” and does such a thing exist at all? Or what do we call “success” and a “victory”?

Don't be misled by the title - *Breakdown Island* is not a dark novel. I even hope I have managed to make it slightly funny. It tells about the desire to completely control a work and the yearning to be free. It also talks about that strange thing we call “fate.” And the twists and turns of fate also conceal a healthy dose of irony.

*Breakdown Island* tells the stories of two women, who tell a story. Each of them only knows her own part of the story, and the separate parts must be fit together like a puzzle. It tells about the personal universes we live in – how they are different from and resemble one another. It tells about women, about men, about children and about cats. It tells about an island. It tells about astrology and a big lottery win. But it doesn't tell about a breakdown.



# Breakdown Island

*Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel*

**A**t 4:25 am the bus stops in front of the motel. It is dark and raining. I bravely grab my bag and manage to hoist it up on my shoulder, but then I have to walk pretty slowly through the rain, which leaves me looking pretty pathetic – in my half-dried, rumpled skirt.

The motel is 10 km from Zagreb and it has a 24-hour café, thank God. I dump my bag on the floor by the nearest table and rush to find the bathroom, then I get 3 cm of espresso, for which they shake me down three euros, so now I have the right to sit down and to open up the book. Cortes's future wife is performing Aztec rituals with her grandma. Great, that fits perfectly with this absurd motel beyond time and space at four o'clock in the morning. It's warm and my skirt is still drying out, albeit in strange, curly shapes. The espresso is good. It is definitely worth two Bulgarian leva a centimetre – so I order another one. When Emcho finally shows up at 8:30 instead of 6, I've already downed four of them. A bottle of whiskey would have been cheaper. We kiss, he apologizes, explaining something about the roads, I tell him the espresso is good and he says that is just what he needs right now, so I dart over and buy two more.

When it comes to money I am more careless than tight-fisted, but I haven't come with much. That's how I understood the deal; besides, Emcho knows I don't have as much as he does. I surely could have scraped more together, but it didn't seem fair to Little Misho and Big Misho. Little Misho is Emcho's son. He's named after the latter's father. But just go trying to explain that Little Misho is not Big Misho's son. People simple ask me what Junior is up to.

Emcho's put on weight. I had already seen last year that he'd shaved his head and I approved, since he didn't have much to shave off in any case. Otherwise he is still tall, still as blindingly white and still has that charming and disarming smile. I have long since stopped hating Encho and in some way I keep on loving him. Emcho is loveable. Now he's telling me how he took some supposed short-cut through some scary mountain roads, but it had rained and there was fog, so he had had to drive really slowly. There were tunnels and they had collapsed, but he had managed to through them so if I promised him I wouldn't scream, he'd take me back the same way so I could see what he was talking about.

As always, he manages to make a plotline out of it. I think that's why I liked him in the first place. Because Emcho's plots are always funny and adventurous, while Misho's plots are always sad and sobering. Except that they're honest. And Emcho's ar-

en't.

I finish off my fifth espresso, the ashtray in front of me is full, but Emcho has quit again and tells me sternly that in that other world, people don't smoke. It's not refined. I think to myself that maybe that's why he's gained twenty pounds, which also doesn't seem too refined to me, but I don't tell him this. Emcho is a sweetheart.

His car turns out to be a brand-new SUV, grassy green – to fit with returning to nature, I assume. I now notice that his slightly militarized suit and shaved head go very well with the SUV. I dutifully fasten my seatbelt and he explains that for my sake he won't take the scary mountain road, instead he'll finally find the highway to Rijeka. We search for it for the next fifty minutes, going in circles around various interchanges and viaducts, always ending up at the sign for the same village. I now realize that he really had left on time and hadn't made me wait at the motel for two and a half hours out of spite. Emcho has a terrible sense of direction, I had forgotten that.

In the end I tell him that if we take the same exit an eighth time, we'll surely end up in that same village, so he hysterically make a U-turn under impossible conditions, and we finally begin to see places we haven't already passed through. One thing is certain, though – we are climbing upward. The road doesn't look like a highway and definitely becomes mountainous. In a short while we see a sign that says "Rijeka."

"This is the same road!" Emcho shouts. "I ended up on it again! Just promise me you won't scream!"

I don't tell him that there's probably no other road to Rijeka, because you've always got to pass through some mountains here. At least that's how it looks on the map. I promise not to scream.

But at a certain point I feel like screaming from delight. Because I've never seen anything like it and what I'm seeing cannot be described in words at all. Because beyond the mountains we can see some other mountains that waded into the sea and are arching their backs like prehistoric animals, but they are real mountains, sufficiently huge and high, yet they're standing in the sea. And the sky is never calm, not even for a second, the clouds pass on fast-forward, changing the light and the colors every second. And we're looking at this from even higher above, and those huge mountains in the sea are somewhere down there, in a very deep hole, and the clouds are swirling above it, as if a witch is stirring them in her cauldron.

"Pretty, isn't it?" Emcho says. "Those are actually the Alps. This is exactly where the Alps end."

"It reminds me of Dante," I say. "Soon we'll start descending towards the First Circle."

Only that instead of the First Circle, we end up in Paradise. There is no trace of

the terrible, magnificent landscape – here everything is soft, calm and beautiful. Now we can no longer see the whole, but only small separate inlets, which sparkle one after the other between the sea-pine and olive trees. They are absolutely unbelievable, as if imaginary. Water does not have that color in nature and it's hard for me to believe that they have not been painted. Seen from below, the clouds look as if drawn – beautiful and harmless, and it's clear they are there without any bad intentions, but merely to finish out the landscape. While the landscape looks as if painted on the headboard of a bed. I didn't know that such things actually existed, I thought some self-taught artists had made them up.

“Now you'll see the island,” Emcho says.

And I see it. You can't tell at all that it's an island – it looks like a separate continent. And there is a huge, unbelievable bridge leading to it, which raises right up into the sky. Perhaps the bridge is the place where I'm supposed to “not scream,” since I didn't see any tunnels.

Emcho lives in Munich and is married to a German woman. He is a film director by trade who never shoots films. In Bulgaria he'd just been about to start shooting and things got all mixed up, to say nothing of Munich. Emcho can speak languages and is no fool. His wife doesn't actually work and he supports the family. He sells plane tickets. He has his own agency. Things must be going well, since he can buy himself a house on an island in the Adriatic Sea. Even though on the other hand I know that the house in Munich is hers. Not an apartment, but a house – I've seen it in pictures. I've never been able to figure out exactly how things stand, but I felt awkward asking. I also don't know why they don't have kids. She's the same age as me, after all, so it's high time she started thinking about it. Because Emcho already has a child, but she doesn't – this is her first marriage. She doesn't talk much, but is no fool, either. She puts up with all of Emcho's tricks with a polite smile, while they used to make me scream and slam doors, and then suddenly she'll let fly something deadly witty and far more effective than any screaming.



# Ivan DIMITROV

Ivan Dimitrov was born in 1983 and holds a degree in Bulgarian Studies. He is the author of the short story collection *Local Foreigners* and the novel *Life as a Missing Spoon*. In 2013 Ivan Dimitrov won the Sofia Poetics Festival. In 2015 he won the first place in the Yana Yazova Competition for best short story. At the beginning of 2016 his second novel *Sofia Duet* was published by Janet-45 Publishing and in 2017 it was nominated for the European Union Prize for Literature. In 2017 he published his short story collection *The Power of Words*.

Ivan Dimitrov is also a playwright. In 2011 his play *The Eyes of Others* won first place in the Original Author's Reading category of the twentieth anniversary edition of the Drumev Theatre Celebrations. In 2012 the play in its English translation by Angela Rodel was chosen from among over 400 plays to participate in the HotInk at the LARK festival in New York. In March 2012 it was presented by American actors in the company of nine writers from all over the world. It was also produced at the New Ohio Theatre in September of that year. In 2013 the play *The Eyes of Others* was staged at Ivan Vazov National Theatre by Mariy Rosen and was nominated for an Askeer award for Petya Boyukova's stage design and costumes.

In May 2012 his play *The Alien* was one of the two award-winning plays at the Blagoevgrad Theatre Competition for best absurdist play; in autumn 2014 *The Alien* premiered on the stage of Vazrazhdane Chamber Theatre with Vasil Duev as director. Ivan Dimitrov's play *Time Sickness* won the young playwrights' competition in September and was staged in Belgrade in 2013. The following year it was among the three Bulgarian plays chosen to take part in the project Page on Stage. It was presented at the Red House Centre for Culture and Debate in a stage-reading form, directed by the American Nathan Cooper.

In 2014 Ivan Dimitrov was one of the five artists nominated for the Stoyan Kambarev Award and his play *No-Man's Gran-nies* ranked among the top five of Theatre 199's contest for best chamber play. Also in 2014 Ivan Dimitrov represented Bulgaria as a playwright at the Interplay Europe Festival 2014.

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*The Power of Words*, short story collection, Janet-45 (2017).

## *Critical Acclaim for The Power of Words*

“Readable, witty, imaginative, demonstrating knowledge of the best examples in the genre, absurd, funny, sad. This is Ivan Dimitrov’s new short story collection. Concise writing, extremely sparing with words. The elements of irony and sarcasm, of melancholy and sorrow outweigh the plotlines in the collection, tending either towards essayist fragments or dramaturgy, towards surrealism or the authenticity of experiences. Ivan Dimitrov has managed to collect the different pieces our lives have broken into and to create a somehow grim picture out of them. In the end, however, we, the readers remain hopeful. Because while reading, we smile or even laugh. Words have power.”

*Silvia Choleva*

“Through the language of short prose, which is a reflection of our times, Ivan Dimitrov goes over his key points: the absurdity of living, the excitement of those in love, the artist’s triumph. His stories are differently charged and touch upon various topics. More important, however, is the binding element between them: the power of words.”

*Martin Kolev*



# The Power of Words

*Excerpt / Translated by Kalina Todorova*

**O**n Saturday, between 2 and 2:06 pm in the small park in front of Crystal Bar, words decided to demonstrate their power to mankind. Otherwise there was nothing special about this day. Mothers with children were moving at a snail's pace in the park, people were drinking beer and coffee and the usual passers-by were milling around.

But there, two women met and the one said to the other:

'Ugh! I have to return these trainers for a second time this week – there's something wrong with them. I swear I'll shoot myself!'

Suddenly, there was a gun in her hand, she looked startled, her finger trembled on the trigger, a shot echoed out and she fell to the ground with her brains blown out.

The other woman let out a scream and kept saying: 'Oh my God, oh my God!'

The skies opened and a deep voice came from above: 'Yes. What's wrong?'

The woman couldn't answer a thing and fainted that very second.

At the sight of it all, a third woman walking her child in a pram, who had nothing to do with the first two, exclaimed: 'What the hell...'

Three short devils with little yet sharp horns popped up next to her, grabbed her and took off somewhere with her. Luckily, the child burst into tears and minutes later uttered: 'Mommy, come back!'

The mother materialized right next to the pram, screamed, grabbed the child, ditched the pram and took to her heels.

The two boys on the nearby bench were so engrossed in their argument that they didn't see any of that.

'Fuck off, you stupid motherfucker,' exclaimed angrily one of them.

The other boy was suddenly naked with an equally naked woman in front of him who gave him the most astonished look and said: 'Tsetsi, my boy, what are you doing?'

All three of them showed a clean pair of heels, the mother and son running in their birthday suits.

A poet, who was yet again having it out with the love of his life, finally gave up: 'You're right! I really do have my head in the clouds.'

His head soared up in the sky and in no more than twenty seconds was already on top of a cloud. From there it smiled at the woman, who started shouting that it should come down.



Also, two friends that had met for the first time in ages were saying goodbye and one of them explained: ‘You wanna know where I’m going this summer? Wherever the wind takes me!’

A strong wind blew up and somehow managed to sweep away only him.

The old lady who fed the pigeons in the park every day crossed herself and started lamenting: ‘Lord, help me! Lord, help me!’

The skies opened again and the deep voice howled with annoyance: ‘Hello? Is there anybody there? How can I help? Or is it another false alarm?’

The old lady crossed herself one more time, wondering what to say, but was so flabbergasted that she couldn’t think of anything.

‘It’s not right, this habit of yours. Calling me for anything and everything just like that,’ God was offended, he drew the curtains and went on about his business.

The people in the nearby cafés started to warn all the passers-by in panic to keep it down and to avoid mentioning anything at any cost. Despite that, there were about twenty more accidents, twelve of which involved physical injuries, five proved lethal, and another three were quite difficult to determine. The six minutes in which words were made real were a total apocalypse for adults. Only kids were having fun, because they would say anything that crossed their mind: bikes, ice-cream, a football ball, a new doll, a remote control toy car, happy parents and other similar and normal wishes.

Although children tried their luck hard and parents avoided this park – as well as talking about what had happened at all cost – nothing like this ever happened again. The only thing to be remembered from the time right after the incident was the joyful cheering of the children and the deep silence of the parents. Words gave a warning about what they were capable of doing and calmed down, but were ready to make humanity’s life hell whenever it managed to piss them off enough that they would bother.



# Kristin DIMITROVA

Kristin Dimitrova (born: May 1963 in Sofia, Bulgaria) is a writer, poet and translator.

She is the author of three collections of short stories: *Love and Death under the Crooked Pear Trees* (2004), *The Secret Way of the Ink* (2010, translated into Macedonian) and *Give Me a Call When You Arrive* (2017). Her novel *Sabazius* (2007, 2011), winner of the Hristo G. Danov National Award and shortlisted for the Cannetti Prize, was translated and published in Mexico, Belarus and Romania. *Ethereal Songs and Secret Services* (2015) is a study she did on the representations of Bulgaria in the British, American and Anglo-Canadian Press between 1989 and 2000.

Kristin Dimitrova is the author of eleven books of poetry, including *Jacob's Thirteenth Child* (1992), *Talisman Repairs* (2001), *The People with the Lanterns* (2003), *The Cardplayer's Morning* (2009, translated into Czech), *The Garden of Expectations and the Opposite Door* (2012). *A Visit to the Clockmaker*, was published by Southword Editions, Ireland (2005), and *My Life in Squares* by Smokestack Books, UK (2010). She has won of five national poetry-of-the-year awards.

Among her translations are *The Anagram* (1999, a selection of

John Donne's poetry), *The Hunting of the Snark* (2013, Lewis Carroll), *A Piece of the Storm* (2016, a selection of Mark Strand's poetry, co-translator Katia Mitova). The first two brought her the Union of Bulgarian Translators Award for Special Achievement.

A graduate in English and American Studies from the Sofia University, Dimitrova now teaches at the Department of Foreign Languages there. In the period 2004-2006 she was an editor of *Art Trud*, the weekly supplement for arts and culture of the *Trud Daily*, and in 2007 she was a columnist for the *Klasa Daily*. Dimitrova holds a doctoral degree in public communications and information sciences.

Poems, short stories and essays by Kristin Dimitrova have been published in anthologies and literary journals in 36 countries in 27 languages.

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*My Life in Squares* (2010), UK: Smokestack Books. Transl. by the author.

*The Garden of Expectations and the Opposite Door* (2012), Sofia: Colibri Publishers.

## Synopsis

*Call Me When You Get There* is a collection of 21 distressing short stories that try to maintain the balance between humour and drama on a tightly strung rope. The characters—ordinary people who are running aground in life, have to unexpectedly face major truths about themselves and the people around them. What follows are the chance for revenge, an unanticipated hope for a better life or an exalted leap into the otherworld. It is a one-of-a-kind epic of present-day Bulgaria—about this chaotic world of ours, full of unclosed relationships and unpunished criminals, in which dignity sometimes proves to be more powerful than compassion. You might always turn out to be holding a trump card in your hands—one that could bring you the victory.



## Look Me in the Eye

*Excerpt from the book Call Me When You Get There / Translated by Annie Dancheva*

Marta got off at the last trolleybus stop and looked around. The wind was blowing newspaper pages along the concrete platform. The ticket booth was still open and its tiny modest window shone like the porthole of a captain's cabin against the swiftly sinking ship of the day. A few taxis had parked close down the street and that was all the bustle taking place at that intersection. Apartment blocks with unevenly lit windows were jutting out in the distance. The last remaining passengers got off the high trolleybus steps and headed towards their homes, carrying grocery bags, handbags and duffel bags.

But he was already waiting for her there. He had propped his motorbike against some bushes and stood smoking in front of it. The second he saw her, his eyes twinkled and locked on her while his arms opened widely for her to climb into. Slowly. Widely, yet not too much. The cigarette, with smoldering light at the corner of his mouth, was waiting for the hug to be over, so that it could resume its place between his fingers. Marta rushed at him, slung her school bag in the air, leapt at him and wound her arms and legs around him. Her long carefully straightened hair splashed into his face and he turned his head aside so as not to burn it with the cigarette. A quick peck landed on his uncovered neck right at the spot where the side zipper of his jacket was unzipped.

"Oh, wait, I left lipstick marks on you," Marta said and started wiping him.

"No prob, bunny," he said and penetrated her mouth with his tongue. At the first possible second he added, "I've brought a helmet for you, too."

"Why didn't you come to pick me up right after school?"

He laughed.

"You want the girls to see you with me, huh?"

If she hadn't been a tenth-grader, perhaps Marta would have asked: "Why don't you want anyone to see you with me?" But she felt her most deeply cherished fantasies exposed and plunged into refuting every single word she had spoken.

"Or maybe you want them to see you riding a motorbike?"

His face contorted in a phony injured expression. His pale blue eyes observed her playfully from behind his narrow irises.

"Yeah, right, who gives a crap about your motorbike!"

His motorbike with its handlebars upturned like bull's horns, with its powerful spine descending towards the seat and the shiny chrome engine was something that truly deserved to be seen. Marta wanted her classmates, the whole school and the en-

tire world to see Deyan help her get on the back of his motorbike and ride off to some unknown, but very exciting destination. She wanted to show Deyan off, too. So that her girlfriends could enviously eye his husky body, his black boots and the tattoos on his arms. On his right arm, in Gothic letters, was inked “Geri” and the tattoo on his left arm said “Freki”. “These are Odin’s two wolves,” he had explained to her, “the ravenous one” and “the greedy one”. They always fight together, silently and always together. That’s what my hands do, too. Everything I’ve achieved in this life is thanks to these two hands. I come from the kind of people who do stuff themselves—whatever, wherever and whenever I have to. As the saying goes, the wolf has a strong neck because he does his job alone.”

Marta didn’t like that saying much because only boring people like her mom repeated it, and only when they were actually expected to offer some help. Her teachers, too, loved it and lately even her sister had started giving it as a response every time she refused to do her homework for her, although she didn’t mind at all peeping into her room to spy on her. When Deyan said it, though, that very saying took on a new and much deeper meaning for her than it had before. When others used it, the whole idea about the wolf sounded very figurative, but Deyan took it back to its original meaning. He loved sharing things about himself—not specifics like those that most people usually talk about, but important things, stories about the struggles in his life that had brought him enlightenment. He told her how he worked on construction sites in Spain, how he survived a catastrophe at an oil drill in the North Sea, how he even drove a semi-truck when he had to, while his faithful motorbike waited, covered with tarp, for him to come back and get on it again. But he never really stayed anywhere for too long because no one truly liked those who play solo. Although they tried to make him stay in Canada, he said, because they liked him a lot, he gave them the finger, because he was yet to meet anyone who could tell him what to do. “One should have only one center of the self, only one lair,” he concluded and then kissed both of his fists in turn—first the right one and then the left one. Marta gazed at him delighted.

The only person who had seen them together so far was, unfortunately, her overweight straight-A sister. One night Deyan drove Marta home and stopped quite close to the building where she lived, and Nina, who had stayed at school until the very last class, had decided to try a new route back home, no one really knew why, and saw them smooching in the dark. Marta was sitting sideways on the motorbike as Deyan had buried his face in her neck while he was rubbing his pelvis between her thighs, helping out with one hand. Marta hoped that her sister had walked by without recognizing her, but it turned out that Nina was waiting for her in the elevator.

“Who was that jerk?”

A smug smile was dancing on her chubby face. Even though she was two years younger than Marta, it was already evident that they would never be the same height.

“You are the jerk, you four-eyed frog!”

“But I do see everything through these glasses. You’re hanging around with some prehistoric jerk.”

“He’s not prehistoric, but a mature man, not like the morons our age! Since when do you know anything about men?”

Lately Marta had noticed with a degree of alarm that her insults did not get through to Nina. She had somehow become immune to them, and Marta had to double and triple her efforts to pierce her thick skin. Nina burned the midnight oil studying, she didn’t really feel ashamed of that, and her textbooks were underlined from cover to cover. She solved the problems from Marta’s math book for pleasure, but the minute she found out that it could be in any way to Marta’s advantage, she stopped. She had withdrawn from the family and retreated into a world of her own, as though she were growing something important inside of her and was taking really good care of it.

The elevator stopped at the eighteenth floor. They were a few feet away from the door and it was time for the final exchange of threats. Marta leaned in close to Nina’s face.

“If you tell Mom, I’ll set you on fire and then say you’d been smoking in your bed. Did you hear me?”

“We’ll see about that,” Nina said and walked in first through the unlocked door. She truly didn’t say a thing at dinner, but the threat was still hanging in the air.



# Lea COHEN

Lea Cohen is one of the most successful Bulgarian writers of the past two decades. She has written 10 novels, one play and two screenplays: one is based on her novel *The Hunter of Sounds* and another on her last novel *Raphael* (2017, with the support of Claims Conference in New York). Both screenplays have received the support of Bulgarian National Film Fund.

In 2010 Zsolny Verlag in Vienna published a German translation of her novel *Das Calderon Imperium*. The book was nominated for many national and international prizes. In 2013 the Spanish publishing house Libros del Asteroide translated into Spanish her novel *La Estratagema*; it was selected as the “Book of the Month” for August of that year. In 2013 her book *You Believe: Eight Views on the Holocaust in the Balkans* was also translated into English and into Macedonian. Her novel *The Piano in Block 31* (2012) won an award from the Goethe Institute and was translated into more than 10 languages.

A former diplomat, ambassador and prominent cultural figure (she was director of the Sofia Philharmonic and director of the international Sofia Music Weeks festival), Lea Cohen has rich life experience. Some of her novels explore contemporary life in post-communist Bulgaria (*The Presidential Candidate*, *Farewell from Brussels*). She is also the only Bulgarian writer to describe the very painful pe-



riod in the Balkan's history between 1940-1944 when 12,000 Jews from territories occupied by Bulgaria were deported to death camps in occupied Poland, while another 48,000 inside Bulgaria proper survived despite persecutions, robbery and humiliations (*Consortium Alternus, The Collector of Diaries, Raphael*).

Continuing her research in the archives of Bulgaria and Switzerland, Lea Cohen has written a series of articles on trials in Bulgaria against Jewish “speculators” in 1942-1943, which marked the start of the Holocaust in Bulgaria. The example of the Arie trial in December 1942 against the industrialists Leon and Raphael Arie which ended in the pronouncement of the death penalty and their execution in April 1943 has served as the subject of her new novel *Raphael*, released in November 2017. The book, showing the machinations of anti-Semitic legislation that led Leon and Raphael to their hanging, has won sweeping approval by readers and became a bestseller. In parallel, Lea Cohen also wrote a screenplay on the subject with the support of the Claims Conference in New York and the Bulgarian National Film Fund.

Lea Cohen lives in Sofia and Switzerland, and regularly participates in conferences in Bulgaria and abroad. She was elected as president of two Bulgarian associations: Bulgarian Women Writers and the Bulgarian Association of Holocaust Survivors and Their Children.

## Synopsis

Raphael Arie (a historical figure from the first half of the 20th century) is not interested in politics – his main concern is female beauty. Through a strange twist of fate, he is sentenced after a show trial. In the early hours of April 16, 1943, in a cell at the Sofia Prison, he waits for amnesty from the king. Between midnight and six o'clock in the morning, Raphael is trying to put together all the pieces of an enormous puzzle, seeking the reason for his trial. The truth comes to him in the morning with the King's final decision...

More than 70 years later, in Dallas, Texas, Dede Arie-Baker, the last living member of the family who witnessed the events from 1943, is celebrating her 94th birthday. On this day she receives a very strange visit. Mr. David Goodman from Good Life Insurance Company asks Dede some questions that bring her back to the story of her family. At first, her story starts as a test for her memory. Later her words become Raphael's confession. The action of the novel develops against the background of three harrowing episodes from 20th century Bulgarian history: the terrorist attack on Sveta Nedelya cathedral in 1925, the banditry and abductions in the early 1930s, and the trials against the "Jewish speculators" from 1942-1943, conducted by the Bulgarian government (but controlled by Berlin).

The novel reveals the true criminal intrigue, which the author Lea Cohen has discovered in the archives.



# Raphael

Excerpt / Translated by Velina Minkoff and Adam Whiteman

That night Raphael never fell asleep. The response to their plea for mercy from the Palace was expected to arrive by morning. It was ludicrous, but he felt just as if he were at the gambling table of the casino in Varna, when, far from his father Isaac's control, he would bet large amounts of money and usually lose. *Rien ne va plus*. He did take into account that the current situation was completely different. When he lost at the casino, he always had the opportunity to make it up later, because he was a good commercial director who knew how to make money. No such opportunity would exist if their plea was rejected. And, in any case, it was pointless to try to fool himself – in this particular instance, he was no player. He had become a play *thing* in somebody's hands. Neither he nor anyone else from the Arié clan ever understood how and when all this had happened.

If there was one thing Raphael Arié was usually never wrong about, it was the real value of things. Objects, deals, but also people. He knew exactly how much they were worth. He could estimate his own wealth as well – it was equal to his share of a prosperous cosmetics company, and that was it. His share in no way corresponded to a death sentence for profiteering. It was about time he determined what had triggered the court's decision for such a feud with the Arié clan, going as far as the death penalty, which was so unusual for Bulgaria. Death sentences were rarely meted out, and then mostly for political reasons. Politics were something all the Ariés shunned – out of caution, and out of a lack of affinity. As the very name of their company *Germandrée* suggested, the Ariés were only interested in delicate, flowery fragrances, which they had turned into a beauty industry. They kept the French name, even though the mountain flower with the light herbal scent, featured in several of their powders and perfumes, had a Bulgarian equivalent – *podubiché*, which grew in certain parts of the Rhodope Mountains. But who would call a fine cosmetics company *Podubiché*? A flower that was prized mostly for cattle grazing in highland pastures would hardly attract the interest of the sophisticated female clientele that the Ariés targeted.

His uncle, Leon, who shared Raphael's cell, never doubted that the answer to their plea for mercy from the Palace would be positive. Perhaps, despite being a French citizen, he could not find it in himself to hold any blame against Bulgaria, a country he remained loyal to. By ten in the evening, he had already fallen asleep from exhaustion. He was counting on his brother Isaac, who had asked for an audience with the King, whom he knew personally. Raphael left his uncle in peace – he preferred to see him in a

deep sleep rather than immersed in dark thoughts, which was so often the case lately.

Around midnight, like every night during their past three months in the Sofia prison, it became relatively quiet. The dead silence was broken only by detached moans coming from one cell or another. It was like a discordant male choir, with some of the singers screaming or crying in their sleep, all part of the score. Sometimes, an iron door would slam and then all ears would perk up to hear what would happen next. Somebody would drag their wooden clogs down the corridor, while the guard on duty mumbled on alongside in a raspy voice. The less experienced inmates jumped out of their cots every time, pressing an ear to the door in an attempt to find out the fate of the poor soul taken out of his cell in the middle of the night. After a few days in prison, they all got used to it, and as soon as the footsteps passed, the inmates just turned back to the wall and went to sleep. Sleep was the most important thing for a prisoner's survival. But that night, Raphael had no desire to sleep.



# Lyubomir NIKOLOV

Lyubomir Pavlov Nikolov was born in 1961 in Sofia. He graduated in psychology from Sofia University – Kliment Ohridski. He also studied at Warsaw University.

He has worked as a clinical psychologist at the Medical Academy and was the national coordinator for an EU project under the Phare – Lien program.

He has published stories in the newspapers *Capital Light*, *Trud*, *Literary Newspaper*, *LIK*, *Sega*, as well as in the magazines *Suvremennik*, *Znatsi*, *Stranitsa*, *More*, *Novina*, and in many anthologies. Lyubomir Nikolov's stories have been translated into English, Spanish and Slovak.

## Bibliography

Lyubomir Nikolov is the author of short story collections: *Karoly the Tightrope Walker* (Ciela); *A Blind Man's Eyes, A Sick Man's Tongue* (Janet 45); and *Still Life with Men* (Ciela), which were nominated for the Helikon Prize in 2010, 2012 and 2014, respectively. He has also published the col-

lections *Sunny Beach – Code Yellow* (Ciela, 2013) and *Happy People* (Ciela, 2017). He is also the author of plays, including *Trumpeters, On Wind and other Natural Feasts*, and *Now and Beyond*; the latter was nominated in the sixth annual Ivan Radoev National Contest for Bulgarian Dramaturgy. He was the winner of the Chudomir Prize in 2008, as well as other literary awards.



## LAUGHTER WILL SAVE THE WORLD

"Happiness is a warm gun"

The Beatles

*The author of Still-life with Men and Sunny Beach - Code Yellow, Lyubomir Nikolov is here. He has that magical ability to soothe the soul and to make you really laugh, from the heart. Known for his warm, memorable stories, the writer has released a new book of short stories, simply called The Happy People, a title that directly challenges the current time. Yes, this happy person still exists - in these 45 stories by Lyubomir Nikolov.*

Laughter is an area where very few writers go, and even fewer stand out. Globally, however, humor in art is a provocative agent - always the target of critics and the public, standing forever between Hosanna and *crucifige eum!* Lyubomir Nikolov's lyrical stories make people smile with that pure heartbeat that reminds us that faith in man is still alive. On the pages we find all sorts of characters - supposedly ordinary people, but strange in their choice of happiness. Here, for example, is an anthropologist who is eating a soup made of dust; a parachutist who never lands in the right place; Mr. Benes; a hunter; the divine miracle of Alba; Ephraim who corrects brains; and a strange captain with special professional functions ... All of them will engage the reader in a bizarre series of faces and events that truly entertain and warm the soul.

Besides being the author of several books, Lyubomir Nikolov has written for many of the leading Bulgarian media such as *Capital*, *Trud* (Labor), *Sega*, *Literary Newspaper*, *Eight* and others. *Happy People* is his latest book from Ciela Publishers, which shows his undisputed talent as a born narrator; the author has the experience and wisdom to flesh out every story with the lining that every humorous work needs to be taken seriously. Writing about happiness is a huge challenge, and Nikolov manages to suggest that it is every bit as difficult as he made it look easy and pleasant. Now that's true mastery!

*After the third beer I start to see people's aura. Most of them are happy, glücklich, happy, staring at the people around them, at the gazes behind the sunglasses, at the slits of smiles. They are looking for any opportunity for closeness or at least for conversation. Everyone is present and they are not old. This is the age of happy people.*

*Lyubomir Nikolov*

# A Story about an Anthropologist Who Ate Powdered Soup for Supper, Became a Demon and Died

*Excerpt from the book Happy People / Translated by Andrea Andreeva*

**T**his story, for obvious reasons, cannot be told by Stanislav, aka “Stashek,” or by any of the antagonists who have a completely different language, but it must be somehow assembled and transmitted for one reason – to keep the balance between the chimeras of adventure novels and real existence, which comes down to the ultimate need to survive at all costs.

There are countless made-up stories about amiable understanding between savages and civilizers, and this is one another and they claim it is the truth.

Our hero Stanislav wanted to be different and unpredictable; he also wanted to disappear from the sight of those who knew him. But he did not want to betray his principles or his life. Without any special farewells, with only a dry explanatory letter, which could not be called a farewell, he set off. He abandoned his studies, dropped armchair university anthropology and threw himself into field research.

His expedition consisted of only one person – he himself, and it was not planned out, carefully considered or geographically precise. It was the whim of a brave and stupid young man, excited by the idea of dressing in khaki and speaking a proto-human language with hominids around a blazing fire at the end of the world.

There were still wild tribes, and Stashek, after thousands of requests, learned from the professor where they were. He went to one of them.

These people were not to blame for appearing as terrible hosts, so I will not tell where they are.

They still did not wear T-shirts and had never seen plastic. They were authentic in every moment of their lives and did not suspect that. There were no philosophies to teach them reflection. They knew they were nothing - some tiny slippers under the Lord's microscope. They did not know what a microscope was, of course.

Stashek knew only where they were. He surveyed the area via Google Maps satellite imagery, but after wandering without the Internet for several days, he lost his orientation. He stood at the foot of a gloomy mountain, night was falling, the strongest rain he had seen in his life was falling, he was soaked to bone, his carefully packed luggage became a matted wet ball, impossible to wear. He would lie down in the mud now and then to rest, and then start awake, shaken by nightmares. At one point he thought he heard a barking dog and headed in that direction.



He had indeed found a village, so he gathered all his dignity and strength and entered the largest hut where a fire was burning.

He was desperately dirty and frightening. His protective clothing was caked with mud, grasses and leaves. His hair, which before had been carefully tended dreadlocks, had become a chaotic mass now raining around his neck like snakes, and his Iron Maiden shirt fit well with the thunder.

As he entered the hut, he scared the savages. They were startled, frowned, turned their backs and began whispering amongst themselves. Fatigue caused Stashek to feel awkward.

They placed him in the corner of the hut, gathered in a circle in the other corner and continued to whisper.

Stashek expected them to bring him a pipe and to smoke it together, he expected them to start beating drums and for a girl to gyrate in front of him, or to give him a necklace with pearls or a talisman. He was on the border of delirium.

They looked at him blandly and uncomfortably. If he looked someone in the eye, they avoided his gaze. An old woman split off from the group and brought him a dirty shell filled with even dirtier water. He refused the water. He did not want to get sick.

He smiled apologetically. He put his hand on his chest and said, "Friend."

The old woman left the shell on the floor and returned to the group. He did not touch the water.

The savages became more and more nervous. They spoke quietly and seriously. The savages do not know irony, nor did they recognize the irony of this situation.

"Only a demon could descend from the mountain during such terrible rain. It has happened before, so it has now happened to us," said the eldest.

"We have to kill him," he added.



# Maria STANKOVA

Maria Karagyozyova Stankova was born in Burgas on November 14, 1956. In 1975 she graduated from the Lyubomir Pipkov National Music School in Sofia specializing in violoncello. In 1978 she graduated from the Institute of Music and Choreography in violoncello. She worked as an assistant director at the Krastyo Sarafov National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts (1979-1982), assistant director at the Stefan Makedonski National Musical Theatre (1982-1987), editor at *Literature Forum* newspaper and *Together* magazine (2002), scriptwriter for the TV program *Why Not* (2005), editor-in-chief of *Books Today* magazine and *The Man* magazine (2006), scriptwriter for the puppet political show *Talking Heads* (2006), and a lecturer in dramaturgy at the Eurasian Academy of Film (2008). Since 2010 she has been living as an immigrant in various EU countries.

## *Awards*

*A Handbook for Killing* won the Book of the Year award of the Fireplace Foundation in 1998. Maria Stankova has won numerous awards: third prize at the competition for young Bulgarian dramaturgy from the Concept of Theatre Foundation for

the play *About the Circle's Edges* in 1999; special Margarit Minkov award for philosophical rationalization of reality at the competition for young Bulgarian dramaturgy of the Concept of Theatre Foundation for the play *About the Circle's Edges* in

1999; second prize for a crime short story at the Agatha competition organized by *The Literature Newspaper* for her short story “Don’t Mess Around with Vampires” in 1999; an award for prose from a competition dedicated to the 150th anniversary of the birth of Ivan Vazov and Zachary Stoyanov for her short story “Balkan Tunes” in 2000; award of the Union of Bulgarian Filmmakers for her idea for the script of *Katunarka* in 2000; first prize in the competition for radio plays of the Bulgarian National Radio for her play *The Hunting of the Desert Hyena*; nominated for best radio play by the BBC Radio – UK for *The Life of the Marsh Shrews* in 2001; award for debut from the Early Bird Festival in Balchik for the film *Several Hours Later* based on the novella *The Clockmaker* in

2006; award for debut from the Jameson Festival in Sofia for the film *Several Hours Later* based on the novella *The Clockmaker* in 2006; award for best film at the Karlovy Vary Festival for the film *Monkeys in Winter*, 2006; award for best film of 2006 from the National Film Center for the film *Monkeys in Winter*; Readers’ Choice award – VIK 2007 for *The Three-legged Dog*; first prize for the play *The Golden Dolphin* at the 14th International Puppet Festival The Golden Dolphin, Varna, 2008; award for new and original Bulgarian puppet play for *The Big Giggle* at the 14th International Golden Dolphin Puppet Festival, Varna, 2008; award for best film – *The Last Journey* – from the International Film Festival in Ukraine, 2008.

## Bibliography

Screenplays: *The Traffic Teller*, dir. Vladimir Shishkov; *The Last Journey*, dir. Vasko Barkov; *De Capo Al Fine*, dir. V. Kuncheva; *Bureau for Nonstandard Services*, dir. Nikolay Volev; *Monkeys in Winter*, dir. Milena Andonova; *That’s Nothing*; *Marko and Chloe*; *The Fox and the Screech Owl*; *Katunarka*; *Life as a Butterfly*; *Ms 311*. Plays: *Queen of Spades*; *Don Juan*; *Anatomy of the Spiderweb*, staged in the town of Taraklia, Moldova; *The Big Giggle* at the Sofia Puppet Theatre, dir. V. Kuncheva; *Karlson* at the State Puppet Theatre, Vidin, dir. V. Kuncheva; *The Little Fairy of the Lost Lake* at the Dramatic Theatre Konstantin Velichkov, Pazardzhik, dir. Zdrava Kamenova; *Krali Marko* at the Youth Theatre, Kragujevac, Serbia; *About the Circle’s Edges*; *Triptych*; *A Moment from Ready-made Pieces*; *Side-*

*walk*; *Natural Enemy*; *A Magical Mess*; Radioplays: *The Hunting of the Desert Hyena*; *The Life of the Marsh Shrews*; Prose: *Suzana and the Gapers* – a novel; *Boredom* – a collection of novellas; *Tales from the Land of Pogovororia*; *The Three-legged Dog* – a novel; *I Want Him Dead* – a novel; *Seven Angry Women* – a collection of novellas; *A Catalogue of Poe’s Souls* – a novel; *Baby Liar* – a collection of short stories; *The Long-nosed One and the Witch* – a children’s novel; *The Water’s Doubts* – a novel; *A Handbook for Killing* – a novel; Poetry: *Upright Poetry Based on Dao*; *Short Poetry*

## Synopsis

Silent night, holy night, just a night, lousy night.

It depends on where you are, who's with you, whether you have everything or whether everyone else has it, but you don't. Whether you're home or one, two, three thousand miles from home. Another powerful novel by Maria Stankova. No falseness, no hypocrisy, like in court – the whole truth and nothing but the truth. About emigrants and how a foreign country slowly, but surely gnaws at them. To the bone. Both physically and mentally. And you're alone and there's no help.

This is not a book for delicate ladies and intellectual housewives. These are five hard years of the life of some hard people – emigrants. No entertainment or optimism. We are all victims. Europe is a cannibal. The only thing an emigrant can afford is parsley and red pepper, while he is serving himself. And while he is being gnawed at, you can hear God laughing. It's not easy to synthesize a huge period of time with dozens of people moving around in it, and to reduce it to a simple story with an inevitable end. When something is very difficult, it's either good or bad. Let's see if God will laugh! That's it, ladies and gentlemen. Everything else is falseness and hypocrisy.



## On the Road

*Excerpt from the book Let's See If God Will Laugh / Translated by Kalina Todorova*

I'm lying in a ditch near the highway to Munich. Actually, I'm not lying in the ditch. I'm outside of it. Only dead bodies have the right to lie in ditches. In Germany, this place is forbidden for the living. If they see me, they will arrest me for... I didn't quite get what they would arrest me for, exactly, but they definitely will. In Germany, there is order and discipline both for the living and for the dead.

It's the end of September or the beginning of October. Everything is green. The grass – a bit wet. My skin – dry and dirty. I don't have a spare one to change into. I only have one clean shirt and two pairs of clean underwear.

My entire luggage is scattered around Europe. The last thing I owned was a suitcase. I dumped it in Bruges. There ended my fight as a citizen who has the right to move freely and work in the EU. I'm going home. I have exactly 25 euro. I sold my computer to some driver. I've taken off the shirt, I've taken off the dead junkie's sneakers, and I'm lying in the sun. I can lie naked. I won't get arrested for that. As long as I'm not in the ditch.

There's a parking lot on the other side of the highway. There are a lot of semi-trucks there. I've been traveling for two weeks and I know all about semi-trucks. Now all I have to do is cross the road. I'm lying in the warm, wet grass; I hate bugs and things that crawl, but I'm tired, stiff, shriveled... I have to stretch and adjust myself. Everything hurts. I'm thinking about death. We could die anywhere at any time. We have to be ready.

No. I don't want to die yet. And then I remember there's a God. And I promise Him that I will convert to Islam if he helps me get home safe and sound.

I'm snoozing, my body is gradually warming up. I can move my feet. I'm not dead. All I have to do is cross the highway. At first sight, it's simple, but impossible. In Germany, everybody drives at hair-raising speed on the highways and nobody would slow down, even if they saw me. They would just run me over.

The life-saving parking lot is just on the other side, but I can't reach it.

I lie there and think that it's going to get dark soon.

When I'm having troubles, I go into my room. I made that room some time ago. It's not white. I painted the walls in different colors. I put in a fireplace, so that I'm not cold in the winter. I'm sensitive to cold. I have this old armchair that takes your body and embraces it with such tenderness that all the pain goes away. I have a bed, too. And a bookcase. At night, I can read in front of the fire. There's a cat in my room. I can snore and it won't be bothered by that. I also have a window. Behind it it's always spring. Wild roses flower ceaselessly, it smells of earth and mushrooms, litter, rain, storm... Every-

thing is so carefully thought out, as if it's real. My room is always with me. No matter where I go, I can always open the door and enter. And then I can just close the door.

While I'm looking around for the warm robe, while I'm opening the window to let in some fresh air, I remember that I'm in Germany. There must be some special way to cross the highway safely! I slam the door behind me and once again I'm next to the ditch.

'God, there must be something for pedestrians around here, right?'

'Of course there is,' God answers and looks at me mockingly.

'I know, I know. I'm stupid.' I hastily put on the shirt and the dead junkie's sneakers, I grab the bag with the dirty clothes and I rush off. About a mile down I see a bridge over the highway.

'Thank you, God!'

'I didn't build it,' God answers and I feel Him tapping my head.

I've crossed the road, I didn't get run over, I see the parking lot, my back pain is fading, I forget about my hip joint, I'm panting, but I manage to reach it before it gets dark. Now comes the most important thing. I have to find a semi-truck with a Bulgarian license plate, which isn't difficult. The difficult part is to convince the driver to take me with him.

'Please, God! Let there be at least one going back to Bulgaria! Please!' But He doesn't answer. He's probably busy. Seven billion people ask him for something every minute. I'm not the only one.

It's nightfall and I can't see very well during this time of day. A license plate from Vratsa! A license plate from Vratsa! I knock on the driver's door. I can hear music inside. He draws the curtain a bit.

The man looks at me and shakes his head. He closes the curtain. I knock again.

'Nein. Nichtweil!'

'Open the door, man! I need to ask you something!'

'Where are you from?' he asks with his mouth full. We are detached. He sits inside, while I jitter outside.

'I'm from Sofia. I can't get home. It's my second week going around parking lots.'

The door opens widely. The man is very plump. His belly touches the wheel.

'Are you insane!? Someone will kill you and they won't even find you after that. I thought you were a prostitute. Get in!'

'I'm not fit for a prostitute at my age,' I note bitterly, because sometimes it really is easier to be a prostitute than a 50-year-old woman.

'Well... you're still fine. Are you hungry?' he asks.

Am I hungry!? Am I hungry!? Jesus! I could eat the driver, if there was someone else who could drive me home.

'Well...just a bit hungry.'

'Eat!' he says and nudges a metal plate with slices of fried chicken towards me. He cuts me a thick slice of bread. I grab it from his hands before he has even handed it to me. He might change his mind about the bread and put it away.

I try to eat properly, but it's not working. I haven't eaten in three days. I'm saving up. I'm dreaming of a greasy cheese pastry, preferably hot.

'So, what's your name?' the driver asks.

'Maria. And yours?'

'Zhoro. Eat, eat!'

*'Nice to meet you!' Now I am the one talking with my mouth full.*

*'And what are you doing on the highway all alone?' the man keeps asking, but I don't feel like talking, because I'm eating and my head is absolutely empty. Nirvana... food nirvana.*

'I haven't got a clue anymore. All I know is that I want to go home.' I should stop eating and start answering politely, but I'm still hungry.

'Didn't anyone pick you up?'

'Oh, they did, three times, but I only got as far as here...'

'Where are you coming from?'

'England.'

'Yes, there aren't many of ours there. The Poles have England.'

'In what sense?' I ask, since I can't eat anymore.

'They have the haulage of goods to England. Our companies have a hard time getting in there. How did you reach Europe?'

'On a ferry.'

'Must be very expensive... ' Zhoro scratches his head, he is thinking, obviously, and takes out a beer from the cooler and gives it to me.

'Um, no. It's not expensive. It's 30 euro in one direction.'

'Did you go through the Netherlands?'

'No, through la Manche. I got off at Calais, then some Turkish guy picked me up. A very decent man. I told him I was headed for Bruges.'

'Sex?'

'Oh, no. No sex. He had gas and he didn't feel like it.'

'Well... I'll drive you, but to Vratsa. Then you're on your own. Do you have any money?'

'I have 25 euro.'

'Right. I will drive you for free, but we'll have sex.'

No reaction. I have examined him from the start. He is overweight and his belly is huge. I'm sure that there will be no sex. The only thing that I'm worried about is that he might have a heart attack while he is trying to, and there will be no one to drive me home.

'Okay,' I say. 'No problem about the sex. We'll have sex when you say so.'



# Mikhail VESHIM

Mikhail Veshim was born on September 17, 1960, in Sofia. He earned a journalism degree from Sofia University and since 1983 has been working at the satirical magazine *Starshel*. At that workplace he has occupied a number of positions — starting from office boy and jack-of-all-trades, moving through alcohol supplier, party planner, and chauffeur to editor-in-chief. Since 2003 he has been editor-in-chief and his own chauffeur.

In his free time he has managed to write thousands of feuilletons, hundreds of short stories and almost twenty books. He is also the author of screenplays, radio dramas, theatre comedies and humorous shows.



## Selected bibliography

1990 - *Nottingham Forest* - a short story collection  
1991 - *The Austrians Are Coming* - a short story collection  
1992 - *Then and Now* - a Sicilian parody novel  
1996 - *Bay Ganyo Returns 101 Years Later* - in collaboration with Jordan Popov and Krusty Krustev  
1998 - *The Three Muscateers* - a short story collection  
1999 - *Letters from Nashington* - satirical essays  
2000 - *Come to the Land of Arda* - satirical essays  
2004 - *End Quote* - literary parodies  
2008 - *The English Neighbor* - a novel

2008 - *Laughter in the Courtroom* - three satirical novellas  
2009 - *Old Hippies* - a short story collection  
2010 - *Nashington* - a novel  
2011 - *The Lord of the Wasps* - a collection of humorous short stories  
2013 - *The Russian Neighbor* - a novel  
2014 - *When I Was a Sea Captain* - a humorous short story collection  
2014 - *Take He Home* - a children's short novel  
2015 - *Tequila Sunrise* - a short story collection  
2016 - *Look Back in Laughter* - a collection of feuilletons of yesterday with postscripts of today  
2017 - *When I Was an Army General* - a humorous stories collection

## Awards

The mini-series *The English Neighbor* was produced by Bulgarian National Television, based on Veshim's novel of the same name, directed by Docho Bodzhakov and starring the English actor Leslie Grantham. The comedy *Agnes*, based on his novel *Nashington*, was performed for several seasons at Sofia Theatre, directed by Sunny Saninski. He has been awarded numerous national prizes, including:

1996 - Chudomir Award - National Humorous Short Story Award

2008 - Golden Wreath Award - *Trud* newspaper's short-story award  
2008 - Rayko Alexiev Award - award for comprehensive satirical work  
2011 - Helikon's Flower - readers' bestseller award, for the novel *Nashington*

His novel *The English Neighbor* was among the ten books nominated for the Literary Award of the European Parliament - 2008. Some of his short stories and feuilletons have been translated into Russian, Serbian, Polish, German, English, Mongolian, Vietnamese and other languages, to bring laughter to other countries and peoples.

FUN AND MADNESS FROM THE SOCIALIST MILITARY SERVICE  
IN MIKHAIL VESHIM'S NEW BOOK

*In his new book When I Was an Army General (Ciela), Mikhail Veshim tells funny stories about socialist military service during the Cold War. The book, inspired by the great Jaroslav Hašek and his evergreen novel The Good Soldier Švejk, is illustrated by artist Damyan Damyanov.*

After he introduced us to *The English Neighbour*, *The Russian Neighbour* and *The Lord of the Wasps*, after he led us to *Nashington* and told us stories about *Old Hippies*, in the meantime telling us about the glorious years when he was not a sea captain, writer Mikhail Veshim amuses us with what he saw and experienced during military service. The book *When I Was an Army General* (with a subtitle *The Adventures of the Brave Soldier Mishev during the Cold War*) includes a number of funny and ridiculous stories, told in the first person, which happened to the author while he was an greenhorn and later an “old hand” in the socialist military service. In times when the ridiculous was something ordinary – and not only in the military service – the writer contemplates various subjects, such as: Which unit did Woody Allen serve in? How to get Beethoven in lockstep? Why don't women like Švejk? And many more!

In his new book Veshim does not betray his well-known style – a masterly written narrative filled with humour and interwoven with enchanting expressions. Like his last book, which came out at the end of 2015 – *Look Back in Laughter*, in *When I Was an Army General*, Mikhail Veshim tells stories of his past which are being published for the first time. The author himself comments: “I would have called this book *In Search of Lost Time* if there was not already such a book from a much greater writer. *Lost time*, because I was forced against my will to waste two years



*and three months of my life, which, as it seems, would be my only one – I don't plan on having another life for now. Two years and three months gone to waste in the socialist military service – who will give them back to me? There is no restitution for the violently stolen years wearing an epaulette. One of the greatest changes in our lives, along with the freedom to write what we want and the opportunity to travel where we want, is the abolition of mandatory military service."*

The book is illustrated by artist Damyan Damyanov. The stylistics of the illustrations are close to those in the original Czech edition of *The Good Soldier Švejk* – in honour of the great artist Josef Lada. The graphic stylized drawings are complemented by newspaper clippings, which give an even deeper understanding of the period Veshim describes.



# When I Was an Army General

*Excerpt / Translated by Valentina Milanova*

“If you were alone on a desert island, what book would you take with you?” Such tests often appear on the entertainment pages of newspapers and magazines. “*The Good Soldier Švejk*,” I answer without hesitation.

This is the book I’ve read hundreds of times without getting bored – since I was a youth until now. I know the stories of the Good Soldier almost by heart, I could even tell them in my sleep. And when I’m bored, I know what to do – a few pages by Hašek and my good mood is restored.

*Švejk* is what my late friend and colleague Krusty Krustev brought to the hospital with him when he was about to undergo a serious operation.

With the bulky volume under my arm I set out on a search for wife – a companion in life.

Here is why:

Youth was passing away – I hummed “not so much, not so much” and lived unrestricted, like a bachelor, free as a bird. Suddenly I met the famous humourist Radoy Ralin. And even more suddenly he started in: “How old are you?”

“Thirty-six...”

“Ah, it’s time to get married... When I turned thirty-five I thought: whichever girl I meet on the street, I’m gonna marry her... So I did. I went down the street and married the first girl I knew whom I met...” he paused and then continued, “Of course, after two years I got divorced...” He took a breath. “But I have two sons...” Again a pause. “Of course, I don’t speak them... But I have a few grandsons,” he looked at me and finished on an unhappy note. “I don’t talk with them either...”

“But then, Uncle Radoy,” I asked, “why should I marry?”

“Because you’re late. You’ve passed thirty-five!” he emphasized his point and went on his way.

For me Radoy was an unquestionable authority – the greatest Bulgarian satirist. I took his advice and went in search of a wife.

But I didn’t want her to be a random acquaintance I met on the street – as in Radoy’s case. So I gave it some thought and decided that the best wife for me is not one with long legs, blonde hair or “pretty eyes,” rich parents or an apartment of her own.

But one who had read *Švejk*. If she had, that meant she had a sense of humour and an inclination to giggle. If for others marriage is a chain, let it be an endless giggle for me – let it pass in jokes and jests. And if it comes to marital disputes – we would

brighten the mood with a family reading of *Švejk*.

I tucked *Švejk* under my arm and the two of us went in search of a bride – whoever had read it, I would marry her.

First, second, third... Nothing.

The answers were: “Oh, it’s something about military service. It’s not interesting.”

Or: “A man’s book... I don’t get the humour.”

“Is that what you’re carrying? The soldier on the cover is too fat.” I even heard this. The ladies all put *Svejk* on a diet.

I never met a woman who was moved by the adventures of the Good Soldier.

So I had to lower my criteria – my current companion in life has a fair sense of humour, life with her is (not always) an endless giggle, and she would never touch *Švejk* even if I left him by her pillow.

She would move the book to the side or she would prop up a piece of furniture with it, so as to remind me that we need to buy a new sitting room sofa.

Yes, no one is perfect... Women don’t care about Oberleutnant Lukáš or the volunteer Marek, about the opinion of Private First Class Vodička of the Magyars or about the gluttony of Private Baloun.

Just as I don’t care a bit about the sex life of the heroines of “Sex and the City”.



# Milen RUSKOV

Bulgarian writer and translator Milen Ruskov, born in 1966, graduated from Sofia University in 1995. He was one of the laureates of the European Union Prize for Literature in 2014 for his award-winning, best-selling and fully-staged novel *Summit* (2011), which has also been made into a critically acclaimed feature film. *Chamkoriya* is Ruskov's fourth novel, following *Pocket Encyclopaedia of Mysteries* (2004), which was awarded the Bulgarian Prize for Debut; *Thrown into Nature* (2008), awarded the Bulgarian Novel of the Year Prize; and *Summit* (2011), which won the Golden Century Award of the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture, and the Hristo G. Danov Award. In 2011, *Thrown Into Nature* was published in the U.S. by Open Letter Books with the support of the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation.

Working as a translator from English, he has translated more than twenty books, including some truly beautiful and important works, such as *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* by Thomas De Quincey, *Novel Notes* and *The Angel and the Author* by Jerome K. Jerome, *Money* by Martin Amis, and *Transformation* by Mary Shelley, among others. In 2009 he won the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation's Krastan Dyankov Translation Award for his translations of *Money* by Martin Amis and *De Niro's Game* by Rawi Hage.

## Synopsis

A man, thanks to his profession as a bus driver, finds himself pulled into some of the darkest secrets of his time. It is the 1920s, when two large military-political factions are struggling for control over Bulgaria: The Military Union, the Democratic Accord and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization on the one hand, and the United Front on the other. The main character is not a supporter of any of them, which allows him to see them relatively objectively. At the same time, he struggles to make ends meet like every ordinary person, and his stories about everyday urban life resurrect the dynamic atmosphere of the 1920s. He could go on living just as he has, but thanks to his nature, he slides more deeply into the shadows.



# Chamkoriya

*Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel*

So I got to thinking and started asking myself: “What are my favorite animals?” One of them, of course, is the horse. The horse is everybody in Bulgaria’s favorite animal. But what about another one? You can’t say a cow, that won’t fly. A pig – even more ridiculous. Sheep? Who’s gonna say a sheep is their favorite animal! Chickens? Well now, I love chickens, but I wouldn’t go so far as to say they’re my favorite animal. Plus, look how it sounds: a horse and a chicken. You’d be a laughingstock, those are two absolutely incompatible things! That’s why there’s that old saying “a horse for a hen” for a bad deal. What about a dog? I don’t like dogs, they just bark all night long. And I don’t like cats either. They’re always jumping up on the table and shedding hair everywhere. That’s women’s business, women like cats. Not men. What kind of man are you if you say cats are your favorite animal? You’re a faggot, not a man. So what about wild animals, let’s see? Wolf. Nah, forget it – who would pick a wolf as their favorite animal! Fucking over-the-top! Fox? That’s heading into female territory again, female wiliness. That’s why they love going around in fox furs. Wild boar? Not even close... What about deer, a doe? If you’re a hunter, that could be your favorite – to eat. Rabbits fall into that category as well. The eagle? Just think how beautiful it is up there flying! But no dice, with that big old beak – like an Armenian bride, I’m telling you. They got big noses like that, ‘cause they’re a Semitic people. They’ve all got big noses.

So what about some kind of fish? A dolphin? Come on now, what’s so great about dolphins!... And then it strikes me: a penguin! Now there’s a magnificent animal! It can walk on land and swim in the water. What other animal can do that?! The crocodile. But you can’t say a crocodile is your favorite animal, for crying out loud! Who’s gonna say a crocodile is their favorite animal – ugly as sin, don’t they call ugly women crocodiles? – and it’s dangerous to boot. Whereas the penguin is another thing entirely – a pretty little animal, plus it swims the oceans and the seas. When have you ever heard of a crocodile swimming the oceans and the seas? It can’t, it would drown! While the penguin cruises straight through entire oceans without giving a flying fig! And then it climbs out onto shore, way down there in Antarctica! And strolls around upright like a man, on two legs. I know, I’ve seen them in the newsreels at the movies. And they’re charming little fellows, sweet-looking animals. But they’re hearty, too – they can take the cold like nobody’s business! Just imagine, down in that Antarctica... Plus they swim in the Southern Arctic Oceans. You’d be an icicle in no time, but the penguin swims and swims and doesn’t give a flying fig. And then it climbs out in that frozen Antarctica, toddles off on dry land and doesn’t give a flying fig!

Yes siree, my favorite animals are the horse and the penguin.





# Momchil NIKOLOV

Momchil Nikolov (b. 1970) graduated in medicine, but for the past fifteen years has been primarily dedicated to writing. He has published the books *Travelers* (a novella), *Short Stories, Fragments of a Room* (short stories), *Mad Doris* (short stories), *Hash Oil* (a novel), *The Top Floor* (a novel), *The Spherical Fish* (a novel), *Machinery for Love* (a novel) and *The Lasts Territory* (a novel).

All of Momchil Nikolov's books have gone through multiple reprints and enjoy wide popularity among readers and critics. He has won numerous literary awards, including the most prestigious prize in Bulgaria, the Helicon Prize, for *The Spherical Fish*. Critics have compared Nikolov's writing, with its surrealist, seriocomic flavor, to that of Haruki Murakami, Thomas Pynchon and Tom Robbins – most likely thanks to his knack for filtering psychological stories through the prism of the mysterious, the mystical and the paranormal, all served up with a sense of humor.

## DREAMS ARE REALITY IN MOMCHIL NIKOLOV'S *THE LAST TERRITORY*

*This is the novel that Bulgarian literature needed – innovative, intelligent and beyond the nation, European. Momchil Nikolov's The Last Territory (published by Ciela) is a book that will be talked about long after its release, because finally, a Bulgarian author dares to leave the beaten track of post-socialism and personal drama, and bravely enters into modernity. The Last Territory, where the author of the Round Fish trilogy wanders, is a breath-taking journey into unknown, unseen ground.*

In 2006, a patient of a prominent psychiatrist in New York draws a portrait of a man, whom she often sees in her dreams and who gives her personal advice. The portrait is left on the psychiatrist's desk and days later, another patient notices it and says that he also sees the same face in his dreams. Both claim that they have never met the man in person. Since then, more than 2000 people from different parts of the world have said that the man from the portrait has been in their dreams. A website has been created where these people try to find out the truth – who is this person and what is behind this strange phenomenon? Is there someone who can appear in dreams, and if there is, how does that happen?

A man wakes up in a town where nothing seems familiar, not even his own face. Who is this man? How did he end up there? Who will he meet by the grace of Fate or The One Who Controls Everything? That's how *The Last Territory* begins – with these questions that take us into the maze of the subconscious with every page. You learn something new on each stage that will help you put the pieces of the puzzle together and get an idea of the whole picture. And maybe learn something about the stranger from the portrait, drawn in New York ten years before.



Momchil Nikolov sets the novel in Barcelona, a maze of a town in its own right. There couldn't be a more colourful and attractive place than this Catalanian megalopolis for the setting of the novel, seemingly crazy and illogical like a dream, but once you get to know it, it crystalizes into a frighteningly well-organized stimulation machine. The author offers 700 pages of jumping from reality to hyper-reality, from life to death, from truth to dream. But still, in the end everything is clear and frighteningly real.

## The Last Territory

*Excerpt / Translated by Kalina Todorova*

**B**ehind us, Jordie, the girl with the dreads and the guy with the laptop, whose name I didn't get, is grumbling loudly enough to be heard, and he's doing it in English, so we can understand that this isn't how he had imagined things – us shuffling along the street like old people with little posters, reading little proclamations, lighting fires, and being more quiet and gentle than grass. We should repay violence with violence – he thinks; then retorts that Suzanne has turned into a pacifist with age – she would probably feel better with the old hippies and junkies than with them. Especially considering that country life nonsense she talks about.

Silence sets in after this remark. Suzanne stops, and the whole group stops with her. Silent, her face red and expressionless as if it's just been cast from iron, she walks past me and Martha, and stands around 30 centimeters away from Jordie. She looks him straight in the eye.

“Listen to me, you little shit,” she starts, her voice flat, but it was obvious that she's keeping it that way with tremendous effort, “if there's something you don't like, you're free to go with that fucking snake.”

“I'm not going anywhere,” Jordie shouts back. “I've been living in the Nest for much longer than you! Why the hell do you think you have the right to order us around? Who are you? Who do you think you are? So what if you're older than us? You're not our mother!”

“Who am I...” Suzanne says quietly, to herself, and a subtle smile appears on her face. “Piero, give me my bag!”

“It's Pierre,” the Italian says flustered, and with relief throws the tarpaulin bag at

her feet. Suzanne bends down and opens the bag. Jordie looks at her intensely.

“What have you got inside?” he finally asks.

“Today, while you were lying on the floor like pigs, I went shopping,” she says calmly and takes out a big new hammer.

“A hammer,” Jordie says, surprised.

“Hammers,” Suzanne corrects him and pours the contents of the bag on the floor. “There’s one for each of us.”

“What do we need hammers for?”

“What do you think hammers do?” asks Suzanne.

The question is left unanswered. Suzanne shares her idea.

“Tonight,” she says, “we will hit at least two, maybe three banks.”

“That’s insane!” Jordie exclaims. “There’s surveillance. They have alarms connected directly to the police station. If it were so easy, people would rob banks all the time.”

“We won’t rob banks,” Suzanne says, “we’ll just trash them. Or are you scared?”

Her eyes look mockingly through the round glasses.

“You wanted revenge for Patricia’s death – here’s your revenge. You’re not a hero if you fight the cops, you’re stupid. You should hit the capitalists where it hurts the most.”

Jordie bends down, takes a hammer and clenches it in his hand. Suzanne nods her head slightly and reveals her plan. Today she went around the central parts of town and has found a spot for the attack. The place is the intersection of Rogent and Mallorca Streets. There’s a square and three banks in a row – Caixa Catalunya, Santander, and another one, she can’t remember the name, but it doesn’t matter. It’s a filthy capitalist institution. We can split up and attack at least two banks at the same time. It’s not a very busy place, there are no bars and clubs, and due to the rain I’m guessing that it will be completely empty. She’s sure that there will be no guards, and the police need three or four minutes to get there. Considering that the cops have had a rough night after Barcelona’s win over Real Madrid, we could expect them to be slower. What else: cameras, of course, are everywhere, but a hoodie and a bandana on the face will do. We break the windows, spin the hammers around and do maximum damage. The bank tellers’ windows probably have armoured glass, so we should trash computers, furniture and everything that seems appropriate. We go in like a hurricane, we rampage for a minute or a minute and a half, and then we flee. We split up and then meet up back in the Nest. On the way we must get rid of the hammers. Basically, that’s it.

The residents of the Nest are definitely confused by Suzanne’s idea. Shocked even. The Italian is as white as a ghost, Linda and Martha look around with their scared blue eyes, the one with the laptop smokes nervously, the girl with the dreads has a stupid

grin on her face, and Jordie clumsily turns the hammer in his hands.

“What?” Suzanne is surprised by their reaction. “You wanted a battle – here’s your battle.”

“It’s dangerous,” the girl with the dreads murmurs. “If we are caught, they could put us in jail. My parents would never get over that.”

“What about your people from CNT?” Jordie asks. “Wouldn’t we spoil their May Day plans?”

“They know about it,” Suzanne says. “If we succeed, they will back us and will do their best to let as many people as possible know about our break. This will raise spirits.”

Jordie has nothing more to say and Suzanne suggests a vote.

Everyone agrees to her plan although they’re all scared out of their minds.

We put the hammers back into the bag and we take Line 1 of the subway towards Fondo from the nearest station – Mariana. Besides three men in orange work overalls, there are several boys and a girl, who most probably are coming from the protest in front of the prison – they are dressed in black and are loudly discussing something. When they see us, the girl waves at us and the boys look at us. There is warmth in their eyes. They probably know we share the same views.

The train arrives and they get in the first car. We get in the second. We sit. There’s an elderly couple opposite us, a man and a woman, maybe in their 80’s, holding hands. The woman is resting her head on the man’s shoulder with her eyes closed. Maybe she’s asleep or too tired to look. The man stays as still as possible. His gaze is strange – it goes through me, as if I’m not there. What does a person think about when he’s 80? What has he been through in so many years? What has he missed? I’ll never know. I’m seeing him for the first and last time. For several minutes, not more. That’s it. A tear appears in his left eye – I don’t know if it’s some eye problem or the man is just upset. I feel the urge to say something calming. Or at least touch his shoulder.

I do it quickly and subtly when we get off after two stops, at Clot station. The subway, like a huge worm with a luminous belly, drives the bodies of the old man and his lady off somewhere underground, while we, still young and eager for life’s feats, crawl out onto the surface. It’s quarter to twelve.

In a dark bazaar, Suzanne hands out the hammers, and we have to cover them as much as we can. I put mine under my belt and button my jacket. The handle digs into me and the iron is cold against my stomach, but it’s no big deal.

Suzanne instructs us for the last time: so, we walk quietly down the road. When we reach the square, we cover our faces and without wasting any time, we attack. We trash what we can and get out. We run away.

After each one of her words, my heart beats faster and faster. Maybe now, when the back of the neon Santander sign of is in the distance, I realize – and I guess we all realize that what is about to happen is crazy.

Two twenty-year-old students from Sweden, a most probably underage female drummer, a horny Italian, a nervous snake-charmer, an introverted computer maniac, an unemployed and extremely leftist German female kayak paddler, and a Bulgarian man, who doesn't remember anything about his life – we're not exactly Ocean's eleven.

Breaking into a bank – not even stealing money from it – and managing to escape without being caught is surely a deed that requires if not superpowers, then at least some preparation. Tactical, physical, and psychological. It's something we lack, as much as I try to convince myself of the opposite.

I'm starting to feel sick with fear. I even want to stop and throw up, and judging by the others' faces, they're probably thinking the same. But it's too late to quit – we know it.

No one stops walking, despite the fear. Maybe – and here's the hope that appears when you know there's no going back – beginner's luck will save you. I mustn't panic. No way.

About 10 meters from the square everyone covers their face with whatever they have. I wrap myself with an orange scarf that Martha has given me. The scarf smells nice, it smells like a girl. Suzanne points at me, Martha, and the computer guy. Our group has to break into CaixaCatalunya. The others, led by Jordie, will thrash Santander.

We quickly pass through the square, which right now, thank god and rain, is completely deserted. The two banks really are next to each other. When we are about five meters away from them, I hear Suzanne's voice: "Now!" she screams and rushes forward, clutching her hammer.

"This is for Patricia!" Jordie yells and runs toward Santander.

The rest of us follow the leaders, according to the instruction. I catch up with Suzanne, and my hammer, at the same time as hers, smashes the window, which, despite being stronger than we thought, breaks with a bang, followed almost instantly by the piercing sound of the alarm.

From then on time slows down. I don't see the others anymore, just the potential targets. There's a desk with a screen and a printer on it three meters to the left. In an instant I'm there – my hammer drives into the screen without a sound. Sparks and smoke, the smell of something burning, pieces of glass falling on the smooth surface of the desk, which will not be spared, too. I grab it with my hands and turn it over. Pens, paperclips, paper, forms, advertisements for favourable loans and deposits and all other bank and administrative nonsense flies away in every direction on the floor. I feel my

pulse in my throat, a surge of strength, anger and hate. As hard as I can, I kick the computer that is now at my feet, and it slides across the smooth marble floor towards the red wall. Object 1 has been destroyed. I locate the next target and move towards it, but I'm late – Suzanne and Martha are the first to go to the desk, and with their hammers that look huge in their hands, smash everything to smithereens. I watch them trashing it and my heart is filled with joy. I don't feel like I'm doing something wrong. On the contrary – right now, the fact that we're breaking into a bank seems normal and right. Maybe the old German lady is right, maybe we really should destroy this entire world and build a new one, where people matter, and not money.

I look around and I spot a shiny silvery metal pot with an ornamental palm tree. Then I notice that Suzanne is obviously signaling with her hands that we should leave. Yes, just a second... The pot is big and heavy, and under different circumstances, I could probably barely move it, but now... now I don't even know how I got next to it and lifted it up in the air; the leaves of the palm tree knock the paintings off the walls, soil and pebbles falling on the floor. For a second, I see my face in the reflection of the glass in front of one of the tellers' desks. Wrapped in Martha's orange scarf, just two dreadful eyes. Then the pot with the palm tree flies off to the desk and smashes on the glass, which, despite being armoured, according to Suzanne, breaks into little shiny pieces that pour down on the floor with a roar. Victorious, I look around, but there's no one in the bank to admire my feat.

At this moment, Time goes back to its natural state. The quiet instance of destruction ends with the piercing scream of the alarm. I jump out through the broken door and almost run into two police officers, who are running from Mallorca. I change direction and dart off as fast as I can. They are following me. I can hear their shoes hitting the wet pavement. I will escape, I'm faster than the fucking Spanish cops. They are shouting at me. Without stopping, I throw my hammer aside as hard as I can. I'm running. I won't give up. The cops' steps and shouting fade. I'm sure they're falling behind. I will get away. I will make it. I will escape. Then I hear a shot. Fuck, they shot me – I'm able to think before some enormous force hits me in the back of my head and throws me face down on the wet pavement.

Then darkness consumes me.



# Nedyalko SLAVOV

Nedyalko Slavov is a Bulgarian poet, writer and playwright. He was born in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. He graduated from Plovdiv University Paisiy Hilendarski with a degree in Bulgarian philology; he also holds a degree in cultural studies from Sofia University.

He is the winner of the H.G. Danov national state prize for literature (for his novel *Faustino* in 2011 and for *The Bell* in 2016). He is the only Bulgarian writer to have won the national Helikon prize two years in a row – in 2015 for his novel *432 Hertz* and in 2016 for *The Bell*. He was awarded the national Flower of Helikon prize for the best-selling Bulgarian novel in 2016, as well as the Ivan Nikolov national prize for poetry for *Marble Years* (2006). He has also been nominated for the prizes 13 Centuries of Bulgaria and Culture Portal; he has twice won the Plovdiv prize. His plays *Alaska* and *Market for Corpses* have been produced on Bulgarian stages.

His novel *The Bell* was declared a literary phenomenon in Bulgarian literature and as the literary event of 2016. In only three months, the novel went through four printings. His work has been translated into German, English, Russian, Hungarian and Greek.



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## Synopsis

The novel *The Bell* was the literary event of 2016. Critics pointed to it as one of the most important and significant books in contemporary Bulgarian literature. The author's style has no analogue – a synthesis of poetic expression and metaphoricity with exquisite prose. In only a few months the book went through four printings and won the most prestigious national prizes for literature in Bulgarian – the Helikon award, the H.G. Danov award, and the Flower of Helikon award for the best-selling Bulgarian novel of 2016.

The 208 pages of this moving novel tell the story of a convict who has travelled the path from his crime to his personal Golgotha in the name of Faith. The first part traces the psychological and biographical development of the main character, Veno: his childhood, overshadowed by his cruel father; his youth; his encounter with the love of his life, the gypsy girl Layla. Up until the day when in an absurd scuffle, he commits murder in self-defense. Years later, after getting out of prison, Veno commits a second murder. Again in self-defense. This time he receives a life sentence.

Several events mark his life in prison. For some time Veno is the librarian at the prison library and books reveal to him the power of imagination, with which he can mentally pass through the prison walls. There, too, he obtains yet another phenomenal ability – his sharpened senses see that which remains unnoticed by others – the green light that shines like a nimbus around every person in the hour before his death. Veno becomes a master of fighting with knives and with his bare fists and becomes an unbeatable fighter. During an amnesty he is freed and returns to his home village, led there by nostalgia and the hope of meeting Layla, settling down and starting a new life. But what he finds there is total destruction. His village has been decimated by criminal types – ur-

ban degenerates and ex-convicts who came from the city during the years of the lawless post-communist transition. They call themselves Memati, after the name of their leader, Memat, a criminal, killer and plunderer, who while alive was buried after his clinical death and who miraculously was dug up from his grave and returned to live a second life. His name Memat comes from Arabic, meaning “underground.” In bloody battles, the Memati have driven away all the young people, while the elderly folks in the village are subject to brutal violence. Veno’s initial shock quickly grows into a desire for revenge and justice. He also experiences an internal turning point. The former killer is called by the priest of the village, Father Vasil, who gives him a rescue mission. Veno must protect the church and its bell. This is a spiritual catharsis for Veno. Father Vasil’s words become a leading motive in his future life: “The time has come for you, boy, as a barbarian to save the Faith, but first you must climb up on the cross!”

After Father Vasil’s death the church is taken over by Father Tanas, who lives in the neighboring village. Veno sleeps in the church more and more often, to protect it from the Memati’s incursions.

Veno’s strength and fighting skills win him animalistic respect among the Memati. His life resembles the legend of those mercenaries who guarded the honor of the wronged – the Japanese samurai. Everyone already calls him by his prison nickname – the Samurai. His fame brings fighters from all over the country, who come to test their strength in knife fights, boxing or with their bare fists. These battles are ruthless, but Veno, transformed by divine faith, does not take any more human lives.

His initiation into church business continues. Father Tanas instructs him in the mysteries of the church – the ringing of the bell, the religious holidays, the church rituals. In those days, he discovers the brutal truth about an unpaid loan for the new bell; both the bell and Father Vasil’s home will be repossessed by the bank. In order to save them, Veno sets aside his Christian meekness – he asks his old prison buddy to organize a fighting tournament complete with bets. Thus, with his own blood and several brutal life-and-death fights he gathers the money needed to save the bell and Father Vasil’s home.

Faced with his unshakable defense of the village, Memat offers Veno a deal – in exchange for peace, he will raid the elderly folks in the village only once a year. In exchange, Veno must not harm any of his people. Veno refuses the offer. So Memat puts another treacherous plan into action – he finds Layla, who is now a prostitute abroad, and brings her back to the village. Through her, he readies a deathly trap for Veno.

Hungry for love and female tenderness, Veno is already living with the only young woman left in the village, Menda. She had sought his protection as her husband was dying of cancer in the hospital. But Veno and Menda’s relationship is only physical.

She is not his soul's true love. He continues to suffer, longing for his beloved Layla, without knowing she is already in the village and that a fatal plan has been put into action against him. Menda's female intuition senses the deadly turn of events and she leaves Veno. Then the love of his youth comes back into his life – the beautiful gypsy Layla. Her reappearance sets events into motion.

On the very day of his second release from prison, Veno has prophetically seen the end of his life on earth. He will be killed and dismembered, with his head and body thrown in different places. He knows the day, the place and the way he will be killed and his whole life since then has been a count-down of his remaining days. In the end his puts the facts together and realizes – Layla, his true love, is the harbinger of death. Thus, a month after her return, they part ways.

Shortly after that, Veno's home is set on fire and he takes refuge in a mill outside the village – the same mill from his childhood, where he had hidden from his father.

There, in the bosom of Mother Nature, he has yet another spiritual catharsis. Having climbed to the top of a willow, he rethinks his life until that point, turning to the past, wandering through the present, sensing his own end, finding his salvation into the path towards God.

In the meantime, taking advantage of his absence, the Memati carry out a final pogrom on the village. Their most recent murders finally force the state to become involved. But the murders are blamed on Veno and the police track him like a wild beast.

Veno flees the mill and finds refuge in an abandoned bus with no wheels, half-buried in the ground –the bus had belonged to the village's former driver, Mityo the Skoda. There, in the bitter cold, barely surviving, Veno receives signs of impending events. In his chaotic feverish visions, which whirl like a surrealist dance, all of those earthly, tragic, commonplace, nameless men and woman who have written the village's centuries old history pass through the bus. In those visions, Veno realizes that he is the last human link in the village's fate.

The second sign is like a divine Biblical omen – one day the rainy sky parts and a vertical pillar of light foretells his impending fate.

The final sign comes from Layla – she leaves him a message that he has been called to the village.

Veno is crushed. His final hope that fate has taken mercy on him is destroyed. Layla has carried out her treacherous mission until the end – she will indeed lead him to the place of his murder. Having lost everything – his love for Layla and his mission to save the people of the village, Veno willingly sets out towards his death.

Yet people move in mysterious ways. Especially the hearts of women. When his sinister prophecy seems to be coming true, and Layla is leading him to the place of his

death, at the last minute everything is turned upside-down. Layla begs him to run, but Veno does not stop walking towards his fate. Then Layla petrifies him. She lets go of his hand and runs towards the place of the execution. Thus, with her self-sacrifice, she ruins Memat's plan and she herself fall victim to Veno's fatal prophecy – Memat's thugs cut her down exactly as he had seen his own death.

Layla's sacrifice wakes him up from his nightmare and pushes him back towards his mission. Veno returns to the village and climbs up into the belfry. As if entranced, he starts ringing the bell deafeningly and chanting: "For Layla, for me, for the cross, for love..."

At that moment, somewhere far off in the dead village – as a metaphor of hope – at every ring of the bell a voice replies.  
A living, human voice.



# The Bell

*Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel*

## Part One

“If you kill, then you’re next...”

\* \* \*

**T**hat’s what Tuno always said in the Pazardzhik Prison. That animal had raped and murdered an under-aged girl. After some time, the girl’s father paid to have him knocked off. Tuno met his end drowned in the squat toilet. Well, now there’s a pathetic death – having your head stuffed up death’s ass, but as the saying goes: you can’t choose your birth or your death. I know who killed him – those two brothers from Straldzha, I heard them plotting – they did it. But that’s how it is inside – hear no evil, say no evil. Afterwards those two ended up knock each other off. The father had paid one of their wives, but she didn’t give the other wife her fair share. But that’s life. Both inside and outside – hellish through and through.

So every day I remember Tuno’s words.

\* \* \*

My father, a machine-gunner during the war somewhere in Serbia, in the occupied territory, got drunk one night and they threw him out of the tavern, so he went down to the base, grabbed his machine gun and came back.

He shot them all.

Fourteen people.

And one child.

Fifteen years later some men came to our house.

In two Jeeps, in leather jackets. Half of them were speaking some foreign language; it sounded like ours, but was strange, drawling, as if they were singing. One of the men, of average height, one-eyed, stared at my father. He looked and looked at him, his eye flashed and he suddenly went wild. “That one there, that’s him,” he started shouting, “Fuck his motherfucking occupying ass!!!” He recognized him. He was the tavern keeper in that tavern. We found out later – the bullet had gone through his head, blown his eye out. How he had survived was something only God knew! But even with one eye he recognized my father. The others couldn’t hold him back – they lay down on top of him, but he was still jumping up to have at him. And my father was looking at him and grinning. That’s what he did when he was getting ready to attack. And that’s just what he did then. He was grinning and saying: “So this guy thinks he’s gonna kill me – well

then let him try!” One of the men, who was carrying a bag, said to the other: “We’ll need more witnesses, to pick him out of a line up.” “To hell with a line-up, comrade,” the other replied, “he recognized him even with a single eye!”

While those guys were comrading this and comrading that, they led my father away. But after a month the old man came back. As if nothing had happened. There were no witnesses, they’d acquitted him. Must have been some other gunner. Some other gunner, my ass. It was him. My father. Even the kids knew it. Whenever he went into the pub, everyone got up and left. But I can still see the old bastard in front of my eyes, even today: sometimes chewing on a piece of straw, sometimes whistling to himself. He loved that best of all – sitting on the bench on the street – back then there was a bench in front of every house – taking out the straw and spitting in front of himself. He could even do it with clenched teeth. One of his front teeth had been knocked out, it had been punched out years earlier, he could squirt right through it, and I must say that he could spit the farthest of anyone in the village. There were others like him, with no front teeth, men brawled back then, they didn’t just hold hands. They would come from other villages to lay bets down at the pub, and they would spit through their teeth, but nobody could come close to him in distance and accuracy.

Besides spitting, the old man loved raw eggs. No sooner had the chicken clucked and he was already in the henhouse. He would squat down – he always had a pin stuck in his lapel – pierce the egg with it and his eyes would roll way back, especially when he reached the yolk.

My father was a beast, he beat the hell out of me. But I was a little beast, too – he’d be wailing on me, and I’d be kicking and scratching: once I even bit his finger off... But to get back to what I was saying.

“If you kill, then you’re next!”

I think about Tuno every day.

\* \* \*

When I was in the pen, it was the only thing I dreamed about – my home village. Every night. And every morning a rooster would wake me up. Always that black, hoarse one – our last rooster: instead of crowing, he’d cough like a three-pack-a-day smoker.

Strangely, I somehow dreamed of everything from high up above. As if I were a lark – a lark fluttering in place like that, way up high in the sky. So I fluttered in place and watched everything from way up high in my dreams. Or I would dream that I was on the White Cairn that’s near our village. I would sit there and stare at the horizon, looking for the sea. From there, when the weather is clear, you can see the Black Sea – it glows like a thin gray stripe on the horizon. But whether it’s gray or black from up close, I couldn’t

say – it just wasn't in the cards for me to ever see it.

And I always took the very same path in my dreams.

I'm coming back from the city, I'm walking home, whistling to myself. Along the way some stray dog always turns up, takes me for its master and gloms onto me. While down below, in the lowlands, the cool oak grove is waiting for me. When I reach it, the dog goes on its way, while I swerve into the first trees and step into a different world. I lie down under an oak, meet the eye of a blackbird with a red beak, listening to it digging around in the fallen leaves, not looking for worms but looking to get my goat. I inhale the rough scent of the woody rot, of old bark and new mushrooms; a column of gnats dances for me in a sheaf of light, then the breeze topples it, while up above the wind tousles the leaves, filling my head with sweet sounds familiar from childhood.

Afterwards I get up, leave that coolness, step into the world of light. I look to my right: as far as the eye can see, the rich black hills roll on and on, folded one on top of another like a soft low mountain, and so on – all the way to the horizon. And on the horizon hangs the summer haze. Above it is the place that is so dear, so precious to me. OK fine, it is a simple, ordinary, godforsaken place, but it's mine. It is not as pretty as a postcard, but still I wouldn't trade it for anything.

\* \* \*

Like I already said, I was an oddball. I didn't play with the other kids, they didn't seem interesting. My only friend back then was a kid goat, Dzheno was his name. White with brown spots, two hanging down below his neck like earrings. His little head was half-and-half as well: one eye was on the brown side, the other on the white side. A little cross-eyed, but the sweetest cock-eyed little goat you've ever seen. We were inseparable. He followed me everywhere. When I set off for school, he'd walk me there, if I went out to the fields, he was always with me. Like a dog. If they tried to lock him in, he would open up the barn door all by himself. And that's how it was, the whole summer. In the fall he was already on his way to being a billy goat – if I squatted down, he'd either mount me or take a running start, prance and make as if to butt heads. In the end he'd come and press his forehead to mine and bat his long white floury eyelashes at me up close. It was love, I tell you! True love! My mother, the poor woman, would just sit and sigh, hiding her tears. I knew that I'd had a younger brother – he'd been two when he died from mumps. So whatever mom saw in that little goat – only she could say. Mothers see everything with their hearts.

\* \* \*

And that monster slaughtered him. He slaughtered my beloved Dzheno. He put him under the knife while I was at school. And even slung his bloody hide on the hedge. And right then and there my heart was broken. For life. Because of that executioner, my

father, I hated people. His bloody fingers left prints on the knife handle, I can see them even now. Ever since then that knife has been cutting into me with a terrible force. I don't know, but at that moment when I saw it – with the sticky clots of blood on the blade, tossed into the basin beneath the spigot – some evil force overtook me. On the surface it was no big deal, some dead object, a few inches of sharpened steel, but more powerful than life. And all of a sudden that evil force swept me up, sucked me into itself. The Devil tempted me then, he promised to give me power over other people with it.

Nine years later I killed a man with a knife.

\* \* \*

Then it suddenly grew dark. That's how it is in late September – the darkness swells, rising like water. Somewhere the muted sounds of human voices, cattle bells, the roar of a tractor intertwined. And suddenly the solitude grew large as a giant. My heart sank, fear gripped me. All around me was a wasteland, not a living thing in sight. But while I had been running, I had not merely been running any which way – an angel had been leading me, because down below I saw Valkov's mill. I had been there, I knew it – when I had gone fishing I had hidden there to escape the heat. Now, at the end of the summer, when the dried-up reservoir had retreated to the lowlands, the mill stood like a dark ghost amidst the haggard willows.

I ran down the hill and soon reached it. The door was hanging open, a few rotting steps jutted out from the staircase. Using my arms and legs I scrambled to the second floor, to what used to be the miller's room. A tree branch had broken the window and was growing inside, so I snapped it off. Then I curled up on the mattress and became part of the silence, I fell silent.

Whether I slept that night or not, I couldn't say.

But I saw Dzheno before my eyes the whole time. At one point he disappeared, but then I heard him coming again in the morning. He was walking at the head the herd, not rushing, prancing around his mother, nudging her udder with his muzzle, wanting to nurse. And at that moment the bells woke me. I looked out the window – a herd had cut short my dream and was gathering in real life on the hillside. They trotted across the hill, spreading and fragmenting like oil on water – breaking into little droplets and glinting golden. That's how the goats were gleaming in the sun, scattering all around. My stomach was growling and now I saw neither Dzheno nor my mother before my eyes. A wild hunger seized me. I listened for a minute and then went down the stairs. A bell was singing by the door – a she-goat had wandered away from the herd and, standing on her back legs, was munching on a willow branch. When she saw me, she started and jumped down onto all fours. She looked at me with her sly eyes, snorted, and, swishing the branch from one cheek to the other, started chewing on it like a little old lady. And



while she chewed, she never took her eyes off me – she was now looking at me trustingly, she had already accepted me. I know when a goat has accepted you – when it no longer cares whether you are there or not. That was just what I was waiting for. I went over to her, rubbed her between the horns, and she thrust out her forehead, she liked it. Little by little I eased myself under her, then I reached out, wrapped my arms around her back and settled in like a kid goat beneath her udder. That’s what I’d done with our goat at home, so I knew the trick. And when they’re bursting with milk, the goats are grateful, too. I grabbed one of her teats, squeezed the milk in the udder and squirted the stream into my mouth. This goat, too, she was bursting with milk, so I could feel how she herself helped me settle in. For her it was better not to have to drag that milk for miles back to the pen. And so there we are – I’m lying there, while she’s standing with her head up, chewing the willow branch. She feels sweet relief, flicks her tail, breaks wind and lets a few turdlets drop, all the while I’m sucking away like mad down below and also breaking wind, since fresh milk instantly turns your bowels to water.

I sucked myself a nice big breakfast and then let her go on her way. She picked her way back towards the herd, but stopped and looked back at me, clearly she had taken a shine to me.

When I had drunk my fill and my hunger subsided, the pain crashed over me again. That’s how God has made us! Every pain comes in turn – first physical pain, and then, when its time comes – spiritual pain. I lay down in the grass, put my hands behind my head and stared up at the sky. Up above a cloud was rolling in from the sea, the winds were changing and reshaping it, yet that cloud always looked like Dzheno to me, and the more they reshaped it and the stronger the resemblance grew, the worse my pain got. I lowered my eyes to distract myself from these thoughts and looked at the mill’s large wheel – once upon a time, before the reservoir was built, it had dipped into the river, but now it was sunk halfway into the earth. Its buckets were tipped and filled with dirt, and wild flowers bloomed in them as if in flowerpots. And because they reminded me of my mother’s flowerpots I burst into tears, since I immediately saw her and imagined what the poor woman had gone through the whole night. Her heart was surely bursting with worry. But I also instantly saw that butcher as well and hatred gripped me once again. “Let the bastard die!” I said to myself. Then I remembered the knife again, its reflection in the sink, I pushed it out of my mind, drove it out, I didn’t want to see it anymore, and little by little the gentle light coming through the trees rocked me, I drifted off and fell asleep.

\* \* \*

I slept soundly that night.

Dzheno didn’t appear. Nor did mom. Just some owls startled me at midnight.

Then I fell into such deep sleep that even the herd's bells didn't wake me.

On the third day, one of the goatherds saw me. I had just settled in under the goat. He was a hunchbacked, swarthy guy, I didn't recognize him. He wasn't from our village. And suddenly he swooped down on me, hollering: "Whaddya think your doin' down there, ya little sodomite!" and raised his staff to wallop me. I tell him: "I'm not a sodomite, I'm Venó." And he just kept bellowing and blustering, good thing the other goatherd came over. He turned out to be a good man, he stopped him. "Whaddyadoin' under that there goat?" he asked. "You ain't thinking to nurse, are ya?" "Well, yeah," I said, "I was nursing." "I'll give you a nice lump upside the head, you can nurse that!" he said, but kindly, he was just scolding me, but gently. "Why would you drink that milk, my boy, dontcha know you'll shit yourself? What're you doin' in these parts? Do your parents know where you are?" "They know," I lied. And he looked at me: "Yeah right they know" and gave me a smile and even some bread. And what happened that night, I can't even put it into words. The guy was right – was he ever! That raw milk gave me the shits like you wouldn't believe! My legs were shaking from squatting. And all that shitting not only made me hungry, I was downright starving. And so I'm lying there in the middle of the night, my eyes wide open – looking at the starry sky, but also listening to my stomach rumbling and growling. A great big moon's shining up there, the shadows are dancing, the dead trees are rising up, coming out of the reservoir, the crickets are knocking down the moon, the stars are pouring down like a river. I can feel how the earth – and myself along with it – is spinning in one direction, while the sky's going the other. And from that vertigo, and from that awful hunger, and from the cold – because in early fall it gets really cold in those wee hours – from all of that taken together, I just burst out bawling. But when you're scared, you can't cry, because the fear is stronger than the crying, so I just curled up on those floorboards and drifted off again. And at some point, what do I hear? Some voice calling me by name. "I must be dreaming," I think to myself, "that voice is coming from my dreams." But that voice wasn't from my dream, but from somewhere outside, outside of me. I wake up and through my closed eyes I hear my father's voice. "That little shit," he says, "I'll wring his neck as soon as I get my hands on him." And next to his voice my mother's crops up. They're fighting about something, their voices are getting closer. Other voices pipe up after theirs. They've clearly set out to look for me. I found out later – they'd been looking for me for two days all over the fields, they'd gone everywhere, but they hadn't thought to check the old mill; by that time they'd figured I'd drowned. So the village policemen had rung up the town, from there they called around to the other villages, asking and asking again – finally they came across that old goatherd and he told them where I'd been hiding.

So they found me. I didn't take a beating, I was off the hook, but it was then that

I saw my father scared for the first time. He was like a horse that had stuffed itself with alfalfa. He had a wild look about him. And that fear of his made me happy somehow. I immediately decided that I needed to run away again. And strangely even mom's tear-stained face didn't make me change my mind.

\*\*\*

Those teenage years are wild and bewildering. You've still got the heart of a child, yet a man is surging up in your body. And you get taken over by these gestures. Lord knows where the hell they suddenly rush into you from! It's like they're coming from a different world, from another time. You start broadening your shoulders when you pass by a girl, strutting, acting full of yourself, you spread your thighs ever so slightly, as if going downstairs, you push your pelvis forward. Those are the kind of strange things that take hold of you. And you dawdle around in front of any mirror you see, or you make every window into a mirror. And you smooth down your buzz-cut hair, and it's sticky from the oil you've slicked it with. And you run a comb or your hands through your hair, girlish giggling rings in your ears, and you prick up your ears, crouch down, ready to pounce – you become a hunter of girlish laughter. While these laughs – they're so different and confusing. You can already recognize their owners in them – which one's thin and shapely, which one's fat. Them, the fat ones have more giggly laughs, but the easier ones – their laughs are chesty, they laugh in a whisper, while the lonely ones laugh like a sob.

In short – there's as many laughs as there are girls.

\* \* \*

So little by little the ranks thinned – some were in the melon field by day, others hung around the park by night. Melon season came to an end, as did the season for love. During my sixteenth summer, my turn finally came. “My baptism.” Kolyu Sharone, another buddy of ours, the boldest of us all, brought me there. He brought me there, practically had to kick my ass inside, I was so ashamed.

It was hot during the day, but at night it was muggy, like before a storm. The air sparked with fireflies. They stuck to the girls' foreheads – but only as long as they ran past the park. The second they set foot inside, that was the end of the fireflies, their lights went out. That's what the old women would say: “That girl's light's gone out, too, look for her on the streets.” Inside it was pitch black. Merely a place for mating. Nothing could be seen, the only sounds were pants, that female physical scent that we'd caught a whiff of through the fence hung there, but now mixed with male equine sweat.

...Dona.

That was her name.

My “godmother.”

Dona, otherwise known as Fat Dona. Crazy Kolyu's eldest daughter. Stocky, mustached, built like a clay jar. Or more like a mated heifer. She'd been thin before and was always sneaking off to the river with boys. I remember that when it got dark, the big boys would chase us away and start lining up for her. As they say, she made family out of us, she made all of us in the village brothers-in-law.

So this Dona was waiting for me on the bench.

"Come over her, little boy," I heard her voice and Dona swam out of the darkness like a combine. "Let's see what you've got there. And you" – she said to Sharon, "didn't you already get your turn, why are you lining up again?" Then she turned back to me: "So let's see now, my little rooster, if you can really strut." And I could feel her hand – she was digging around in my pants. Her hand was big, rough, straight as a spade. I was shaking – from fear, desire, horror, while she grunted: "Well, well, well, he's just a little guy, but look what a cock he's got on him!" – and then she put me behind her and laid down crossways on one side of the bench, settled into position, put her ass in the air and since she wasn't wearing any panties, she grabbed me right by the cock and pushed it into something warm. My head started spinning, I rocked back and forth, she was twisting side-to-side, moaning. I see she's moaning, so I say to myself, that means I better be moaning, so I started in, too. She moans, I moans, and in the end I let out a thin squeal like a titmouse – and that was it. I had come. That was all. It had all lasted less than a minute. And she chortled, pushed me back with her ass, shook me off like snow and I fell off the bench. Straight into those bushes – the yuccas, whose name I found out later, actually, that was why I learned it, because I fell into them every time. So while I was coming to my senses on the ground, what do I see but Sharone – he was already stuck tight to our jar, huffing and puffing.

So much for that night.

\* \* \*

Woman left a hunger in me.

My first taste was a quick gorging, on my feet. The next ones in the park as well. You grab, bend swallow. And that's it. You cling to some body, enter something warm, you're going back and forth, it's going side to side, you pull out; the sweaty bodies come apart with the sound of a band-aid being ripped off... and that's it.

I was wandering like a wild beast.

Alone.

Growling.

I didn't know what love is.

And that's how it was – until she appeared.

Layla.

There was this crazy kid, Psycho, one of the Manovs, he had foreseen them. They even made a song from his words. I had heard that song from mom:

They will come on white horses...

And they came.

It was years ago. And not on white, but on black horses...

They set up their camp above the Triple Sign, above Konyov's Fountain, they spent a summer there. They came into the village to sell willow branches. Then certain things started disappearing – barrels of brandy, cauldrons from the hedges. Our men had had enough. They went and gave the gypsies a good beating, took back what had been stolen and ran them off. But in the spring they came back.

This time the mayor, along with the police, went to them and they were like—we're done with thieving, we'll toe the line, we won't touch a thing – and they did toe the line. They wove willow baskets the whole summer. Only the copper bells off Tanas Marin's sheep disappeared so he had to chase them all over the fields like chickadees. But that turned out to be another story. The gypsies hadn't swiped them, but some of his relatives – that is, some of our own wild villagers. It was a family feud and revenge of sorts, they'd been stealing each other's bells for five-six generations now, those Tanas-Manas-Marin folks, very stupid folks, they were.

They came back again the third spring. This time they had blond kids with them, though. Clearly our folks had been pawing around in their girls' shalwars like crazy. So, little by little, since our blood had already been mixed up a bit, other stories started up. Besides, they were pretty gypsy girls, graceful yet easy. Plus they were hardy when it came to love, wiry and toughened up from that constant aimless wandering here and there, which actually best suits our whole aimless little lives.

There was a new mayor in town, an enterprising type – he offered them village land to settle down. But what is the gypsy most afraid of? The hoe, of course! Only then followed by dogs, crazy folks and Turkish graveyards. Why exactly Turkish graveyards, I don't know, but that's how the saying goes, so that's why I've said it. They laughed at the mayor's offer and flew away with the swallows. Then crazy Psycho wrote the following lines of the song:

*They'll come on white horses...*

*Under the udder of a gentle mare...*

*A colt... ...in the wake of this majestic gait...*

*It will bend its slender knees*

That's what he saw, so that's what the boy wrote about them. But I, for my part,

would've written it differently. I'll say just one thing – Gypsies, when there's only a few and they can jump on their caravans, then they're still gypsies and can be tolerated. They even make your heart envy them for their freedom, because they are not slaves like us, chained to the land and forced to run in place their whole lives, to be buried in the same place we were born. But when there's a whole lot of them together, when you can no longer load them into their caravans – then trouble is on the way.

That third autumn the gypsies flew away, too, but two families stayed. They went to the mayor, signed the papers, were given a bit of land then – marvel of marvels – they settled down, put down roots.

The eldest of them was called Kutsar. And from there came his family line – the Kutsarovs.

\* \* \*

Today the neighborhood has grown to thirty or so houses. The horses are long since gone. No white, no black. There were only donkeys, those Strandzha-style donkeys. And there were tall Yambol-style mules, the really nasty ones, they eat newspapers and posters and are always looking to give you a good kick or to bite you.



# Svetlana DICHEVA

Svetlana Dicheva was born on January 14, 1960, in Plovdiv. She graduated from the French Language School in Sliven and majored in Radio Journalism at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. She has been part of the Horizont Program of the Bulgarian National Radio since 1985, specializing in cultural journalism. She has hosted some of the most popular radio shows, such as the morning segment “Predi Vsichki” and the afternoon informational segment “12 plus 3”. Dicheva has also been a reporter and a TV host at Bulgarian National Television. For the past two years she has been the host of the popular Saturday radio show “Zakuska na Trevata” where she has invited many famous artists and public figures. She is the author of the “Biblioteka Horizont” radio segment, which focuses on books written by Bulgarian writers.

## *Awards*

Bлага Dimitrova Award for a collection of short stories for *The Balkan Prophet*

## *Bibliography*

### NOVELS

*Mona and Magellan*, 2005 (2017 published by lexicon\*)

*A Labyrinth for Romantic Minotaurs*, 2009

*Gala's Rabbit*, 2010

## NOVELLA

*A Grand Piano in the Basement*, 2013

## COLLECTIONS OF SHORT STORIES

*The Balkan Prophet*, 2000 (2017 published by lexicon®)

*A Party for Spoiled Loners*, 2014

## PLAYS

*The Migration of the Salmon*, part of the collection of plays *Two Plays: The Migration of the Salmon/ Mercy. Impersonating Anne Sexton*, 2016

## Synopsis

Every person loves themselves to some extent. This is as it should be, unless, of course, this turns them into self-involved egocentrics.

But in present day a vital question arises: is it possible to love yourself and to hate your body at the same time? If it is true what religion postulates—that we also exist outside of our bodies— then, alas, here and now, our bodies are the vessels that contain our non-physical essence. But does our personality actually adjust itself to the shape of that vessel?

Is it possible to love yourself and to hate your body at the same time?

This topic is a main theme in every existing type of media: there is plenty of talk about the healing effect of hunger, about trying all sorts of junk medications, about different kinds of diets; we even see politicians whom we mention so often (usually not in a positive light) as “corpulent”.

This is the subject of the stories in this entertaining book full of wit and irony. Svetlana Dicheva has scrupulously analyzed the relationship that we have with our bodies. She has dressed that analysis in the form of short stories that will make you laugh heartily, they might also sadden





you a bit, but, I warn you, they won't help you fall asleep in case you choose them for an evening read.

Just one more thing. Svetlana's short stories will show you that the vessel is not important, the body is not important. What matters is the content that fills it up; the personality inside that body is who we really are. The Devil always shows up in a beautiful wrapping. Enjoy!

*Robert Levy*

## Bobbie Lo's Dream

*Excerpt from the book Dark Chocolate Stories / Translated by Annie Dancheva*

Maggie loved her neighbourhood and she was very happy to go home after her long workday at the company. She was a manager at a cosmetics firm and the creative manger, that damn churl, loved late-night meetings. He was not only anything but creative, but he also believed that ideas are born in the late hours. Maggie wasn't really affected by that because unlike the other department managers—most of whom were men—she didn't have a family, she was 36 and she thought that marriage and children could wait and could even not happen at all. One cannot achieve everything in life after all, right? Her career was number one on her priority list and so far she was doing perfect. So she left the house at seven in the morning and got back at ten o'clock in the evening and on the weekends she hopped into her Toyota Hybrid at cockcrow and dashed off to go see parents who lived sixty miles to the north of the city, so she could see again the fountain of her childhood and taste her mother's pancakes. And also hear the never-ending: "When will you find a boyfriend?"

One Saturday her sleep-over fell through, as her parents had flown all the way to New York to see some friends of theirs. That was actually the first time Maggie had woken up in her own leased house, looked out the window at the houses across the street and was completely dumbfounded by what she saw—some woman was trying to get through the front door of her home and failed. Maggie rubbed her eyes. Yes, the woman really couldn't get out because she . . . had apparently somehow got stuck there.

*This is a country where elephants, hippos and rhinos walk on two legs, she thought spitefully, because she couldn't stand obesity both as a health and an aesthetic issue. The land of people who get stuck in the front door of their own homes!* She turned her back on

that sight and went over to turn her TV on. She had no idea how many channels there were in the package she had subscribed for. A couple hundred? But why was she paying for two hundred channels when she had even forgotten where the remote control was? A culinary channel caught her interest and she watched a gaspingly plump lady preparing some complex dessert with lots of cream. *Well, no wonder she weighs 220 pounds when she's cooking up such greasy crap*, Maggie thought and switched the channel. She came to another culinary one—this time it was some fatso making “duck magret in apricot sauce”. *These people live to eat*, she sighed and went back to the kitchen to fill up her cup of coffee. She threw another glance at the house across the street. The woman was still there, just as stuck at the doorframe! Their eyes met and the woman started waving at her desperately! Maggie looked at her watch out of habit. That moron, the creative manager, had trained them all to know what time it was at every single moment. Twenty-seven minutes had passed since she had seen the woman in the door. Jesus Christ! Maggie let out a sigh of boredom, left her cup on the counter and committed herself to mission “helping elephant-size ladies stuck in their doors”. What a Saturday! Besides, how come her parents had bolted for New York? She had no recollection of them having ever paid anyone a visit. And what friends did they have at all, such that they could pay anyone a visit? Both of them were doctors and talked business only, which is certainly not a way of making and maintaining any friendships.

She crossed the distance between the two houses half-flying with her 114 pounds.

“Maggie,” she introduced herself, offering her ridiculously slender hand to the stuck woman.

“Bobbie Lo,” blinked the woman with a beautiful face perched on top of an unseen trunk. She didn’t even try to extend her hand. She had gotten stuck at the level of her hips. It looked like a hoop skirt that hadn’t been turned to the side. It’s not possible for anyone to have such hips, it’s just not!

“It’s never happened before,” Bobbie Lo said, but Maggie didn’t buy it.

“If I try to push you in, are you sure you’ll be able to keep yourself up and steady?” Maggie asked in a business-like fashion. She was highly doubtful she could thrust back all of that body mass, but the idea of her trunk landing on the tiles inside the house with that pretty blond hair hitting the floor did not look especially fascinating to her.

“I’ll try to hold on to the doorframe,” the woman said decidedly. Her eyes were not just beautiful, they also had clever look to them, too.

Unfortunately, that was as far as her beauty went.

Before she prepared to attack that enormous mass of human flesh with her tiny

frame and chicken-like fists, Maggie stopped for a second and gave it a thought.

“Bobbie Lo,” she took up, “there must be some other way. Do you think that you might just have panicked and that once you calm down, you might be able to get out effortlessly?”

Something had made her think that Bobbie Lo wasn't actually stuck, but rather craving attention.

After a few minutes of maneuvering Bobbie Lo really managed to free herself from the clutch of the door and embarked on a long torturous journey back to her kitchen. Maggie followed her and studied her, hardly believing her eyes: such a body could not possibly exist in the real world. Minuscule feet, disproportionately small for all the load they were supposed to carry. Gargantuan mountains of flesh descending from her legs, each of which could've, on its own, safely passed for an oversize person of its own and, over the hoopskirt-like or boat-like hips, loomed the upper part, as voluptuous as they get, but nevertheless particularly graceful compared to the lower half. Because it could at least pass for the upper part of one single person instead of two, powerful as those belts of flesh around the waist and the flab on her back were.

Yes, yes, the lower part was definitely double, as though the woman wasn't satisfied with having a single body, but wanted to double herself. Maggie thought that Bobbie Lo's bones must be made of steel since they could support flesh of such unbearable proportions. And above the shoulders—surprise! An almost delicate neck and a truly beautiful head. Something else crossed Maggie's mind, too, and it was an especially refined thought—she wondered how Bobbie Lo scratched herself when her butt itched with those ultra-short arms and that massive butt which, just like the trunk of a baobab, would take a few people holding hands to encircle it. When Bobbie Lo finally managed to drag herself up to some chair, Maggie realized that it didn't look like the other chairs. It was wider and more solid, obviously custom made. Then Maggie looked around and noticed that the whole house looked a bit odd and everything inside of it was adjusted to suit the body of a giant woman. Still, when Bobbie Lo sat down, the sides of her haunch jutted out unstopably. It was not just a rather uncommon sight to see, but also quite sad indeed.

“I'm having some carpenters coming next month to expand the doorframe,” Bobbie Lo said as though she had read her mind. I usually turn to one side when I go through the corridor and walk out in this way, but today I forgot because my son called to tell me that he's getting his degree. He is the first person in my family with a diploma and I got very excited.”



# Theodora DIMOVA

Theodora Dimova (b. 1960) graduated in English Language Studies from the Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski and has studied at the Royal Court Theatre in London. She has won many literary awards. Theodora Dimova is daughter of the famous Bulgarian writer Dimitar Dimov.

## *Bibliography*

### NOVELS

*Emine* (2001)  
*Maikite* (2005)  
*Adriana* (2007)  
*Marma, Mariam* (2010)

### PLAYS

*Fyuri*  
*Staya № 48*

*Erikapayos*  
*Calvados, priyatelyu*  
*Igrila*  
*Platoto*  
*Neda i Kuchetata*  
*Elin*  
*Stoper*  
*Zamakat Ireloh*  
*Bez Kozha*  
*Zmiysko Mlyako*  
*Kuchkata*  
*Lyubovnitisi*

FOR THE BIRTHDAY THAT THE WHOLE OF MANKIND CELEBRATES – IN A  
SHORT NOVEL BY THEODORA DIMOVA

*In the time when the world grows silent and people contemplate the past year, one finally turns to what is most sacred – faith. Writer Theodora Dimova speaks of faith’s different faces and presences in her new book The First Birthday.*

In her work, Theodora Dimova confidently moves toward those metaphysical themes which occupied the minds of literary giants such as the poets John Donne, Fernando Pessoa and W. B. Yeats. In her short novel, *The First Birthday* (Ciela), the author reveals not only her regard for active Christianity, but also her personal belief that faith is innate to man, no matter how broken and “overgrown with superstitions” it might be. Theodora Dimova speaks to the reader on two levels – as an earnest Christian, and as a person who has not lost her faith in man, building on what she hinted at in her other books, with a culmination in this one.

*The First Birthday* could be seen as the spirit of humbleness which we all feel in the days before Christmas. The author of *Emine*, *Mothers* and *Marma*, *Mariam* rehabilitates Christianity and its meaning in everyone’s life by telling a parable which touches the soul in a unique way – with few, yet powerful words.

Dimova is a writer who often chooses pictures by the old masters for her books. In *The First Birthday*, we see Mary and Elizabeth, embraced in a dance-hug (a fragment from “The Visitation” by Arcabas), bearing in their wombs the Sons who are destined to greatness. It is precisely this feast of the soul that the author has captured in her short novel – a great Christmas gift.



# The First Birthday

*Excerpt / Translated by Valentina Milanova*

One sesame loaf, olives, the lump of goat cheese which he bought from the merchant in the morning, the dried figs, too, the chickpea and legume dish, the wooden spoons, set one next to the other on top of the common plate, the beautifully embroidered linen cloth, which they received as a present, and the wax candle on the uneven dirt floor – Mariam arranges the objects one by one with supple, slightly slowed movements, she has not yet regained her youthful flexibility, and the trials and misfortunes have made her more thoughtful, quieter, and that early, almost sudden dusk, and that very short day, which marks one year from the birth of their child.

Only one year has passed, Mariam, and what has not befallen us, here we are refugees in the land of Egypt, in this village on the outskirts of the ancient Goshem town of On, in fact, Judaic, full of people of our faith, but still foreign, Egyptian Jews stopped speaking Jewish long ago, generations one after the other have almost entirely forgotten it, and they no longer read the sacred scriptures in our tongue, but still, they have kept the faith of our ancestors and God's ordinances, pure and hearty people they are, they accepted us with open hearts, so we stayed with them, from all the towns and villages we passed through in Egypt, they welcomed us the most warmly here, they showed us to this abandoned house, they gave us what is necessary for a home, to be able to feed and take care of our child, and we are grateful, but still, we are in a foreign place, we are thankful for the shelter, the straw mats and the clay dishes, for the wooden trough in which you, Mariam, bathe our child and wash his covers, and we don't know how long we will live here, the angel told me in that fierce night that we must stay here until he comes again, but a whole year has passed, we might stay here for a long time, it might be forever, Mariam, I know that you oppose that thought, but it might be forever. You yearn for Galilee and for Nazareth. You come outside our house and you yearn to see the smooth line of the hills, buried in greenery, the vast valley at the foot of Tabor, from which even the ridges of Kedumim could be seen, the vines, heavy with grapes, you long to see the blooming shrubs, the ancient olive groves and fig plantations, your eyes yearn for the shade of the oleander and the pomegranates, of the cypresses and the jasmine bushes, they seek the wondrous fragrance of spring and crystal-clear air. But here your eyes have nothing to focus on, Mariam. We have lost track of distance, of what is close and far, because of the monotony of the landscape, there is only reddish stony earth here and no plants, Mariam, no shrubs even, only that dry, thorny grass. Yesterday I thought

I saw a tree in the distance, I went towards it, it seemed to be close, but I walked for an hour, what was the tree, Joseph? Unknown to me, not so tall, with an almost white trunk, with thick, fat, shiny leaves. Oleander? No, unknown to us, Mariam, not a locust, nor a maple, not even a sycamore, it was unusual for a green tree to stand amidst that cracked dry land, Mariam, amidst that wasteland of thorns and weeds, thorns and ryegrass, thorns and snakes, Mariam, as though God spoke of exactly this wasteland to Adam and told him that with the sweat of his brow he would till the earth to earn his bread, as though exactly this wasteland was God's curse for sin, Mariam, only the cracked, sandy, dry earth, sometimes snakes crawl out of the holes, short and thin, they dart and hiss in the still air, it is most dangerous to step on them and we must always be cautious outside, Mariam, especially in their mating season, when they get tangled into balls and hiss even more wildly and drily. Yes, I yearn for the hills and heights of Galilee, Joseph, for the calming evening wind, for the flat roof of our home, on which on warm nights we spread our mats and slept beneath the starry sky, for the abundance of fragrances, for the flowers and the shrubs, which bloom in the spring and turn the hills into gardens, I grieve for the green plains and valleys, for the crystal air, for the fine web of the tamarisk trees, for the glades full of bright flowers, for the sprouting wheat crops, for the coolness of the cedars of Lebanon on the streets of Jerusalem, for the coo of the doves in the trees, Joseph, especially in the afternoon, at midday, when everything is silent in the heat as though waiting, their calm, languorous, caressing cooing, and the geese, which walk proudly in the yard, and the doves which fly over, and the starlings like sapphires darting above the shrubs, and the crimson range of Mount Kedumim, and the white stone houses, Joseph, and the well with clear water and the gardens around it with oranges and pomegranates, I grieve for all of this. And here there's only the sandy Egyptian plain, some thorny bush at best, here and there a lone tree stands and as you said – we cannot even say how far it is, because our sight tires and dims from the monotonous reddish desert, tires and turns down, Joseph, turns inward in grief. May our Lord let us return to our homeland, Mariam. But let us not think of this now, Joseph, let us wait for our son to wake and let us sit together around the festive cloth that I put on the camel hide, we will say our prayers in gratitude for the first year of our son's life, we are not pagans, Mariam, to celebrate! Only the followers of that hateful Herod adopted the birthday gaiety from the Romans, to show them their servility and that they like their customs, yes, Herod restored the temple of Solomon, decorated it in gold and alabaster, and marble, built roads and palaces, under the influence of the invaders, built hippodromes for their enjoyment, but we all remember how he ordered the death of his first wife Mariamna and her brother the high-priest, because the people loved and respected them, so his heart filled with envy and then he could not quell his grief for Mariamna and so he drowned it in shameful

feasts, lechery and orgies, he drowned it in blood and murder, let us not speak of Herod, Joseph, we will celebrate when our son passes his childhood, when he becomes a youth, so it is, Joseph, and only with our gratitude will we now mark the first year of his birth. Only one year, and what has not befallen us, Joseph. We will remember in prayer time and again the events we witness, the astonishment and thrill of them, and the words of unknown men, words which I gather and lock deep inside my heart, and I think of them, and think them over, and remember them, and wonder at their meaning, this is our happiness and joy, our comfort – the remembrance of events, when it all started, and also the sharing of our humble table, the goat cheese, the figs, the pomegranate, the bread, baked in live embers, it is still warm.





# Vessella

## LYUTZKANOVA

Vessella Lyutzkanova was born in Sofia. She majored in Industrial and Civil Engineering at the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy. Lyutzkanova worked as a building designer for two years and has completed more than two hundred projects. She was an assistant at the Strength of Materials Program for three years and trained over 1,500 students. Vessella spent four years as a Deputy Director of the Union of the Bulgarian Writers, a period during which the building underwent a general repair—the literary hub at 5 Angel Kunchev St. was furnished with a café, a quiet rendezvous point, a cinema hall, a restaurant and offices for the chairperson and the secretaries as well as for the editorial offices of several magazines. Under her leadership the repair work on the Union's retreat house in Hisarya was done. The vacation-and-creativity home at the Golden Sands resort was enriched with the acquisition of another such home along with de Lamartine's House, completely restored with its original furnishing. At that time apartment block 317 was also built, which has provided homes for many writers. She has been an editor at the Smyana Library Department, which focuses on discovering young talents and later took on the management of the Adventures and Science Fiction Department at the same publishing house, National Youth. After the political changes in 1989 she set up her own eponymous publishing house.

## Awards

Silver Ring for her short story “Prelude and Fugue No. 8”

Twenty-five first prizes for short stories published in the press

The Readership Jury Award for the short story “Stand up and Walk”

The Hristo G. Danov Award for contemporary novel – *Storks on the Ice*

The European Eurocon Award for Lifelong Literary Achievement for 1989

Graviton Award for creative imagination  
Award from the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture for literary achievement

International Gold Star Award for quality and prestige

Yearly Award of the Union of the Bulgarian Writers for Best Collection of Stories for *Bye-Bye, Happiness*

Honorary Award of the Union of the Bulgarian Writers for Literary Achievement

Simeon’s Gold Seal Award by the Ministry of Culture

Salamander Award for *Criminal Record*

## Bibliography

### SHORT STORIES

*Life–That Endless Frenzy*, a collection of short stories. Awarded first place for best debut by Prof. Toncho Zhechev in 1971.

*Heavy Portrait Make-up*, 1982

*The Gorgon’s Visage*, 1987

*The Other Door*, 1990

*Ray the Crook and Others*, 2003

*Bye-bye, Happiness*, 2006

*The Watch with the Gold Chainlet*, 2009

*Love Still Exists*, 2010

*Whirlpool*, 2012

*Bad Time for Beautiful Stories*, 2016

### NOVELS

*Clones*, 1975, published in Anteni Magazine 1971

*The Clock at the End of the Corridor*, 1982

*Code Word “Adria”*, 1984

*Storks on the Ice*, 1986

*Guilt for the Guiltless*, 1986

*Incomplete Profile*, 1987

*Kali Yuga*, 1993

*The Great Con*, 1994

*Life on the Edge*, 1995

*Banking School*, 1996

*Publishers. At the Gates of the Temple*, 1994

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*Return of the Clones*, 1998

*Departure of the Clones*, 2004

*Time for Loafers, Time for Saints*, 2007

*Life – Short and Absurd*, 2009

*Vampire Therapy*, 2012

*Life Awake and Asleep*, 2014

*The Other One in Your Dream*, 2014

*The Book Marketplace*, 2015

*Criminal Record*, 2015

## NOVELLAS

*Running on Two Straight Lines*, 1974

*Dark Jazz*, 1976

*Delicate Profile*, 1997

## TELENOVELAS

*I Can't Get Myself to Cry*, aired on the Bulgarian National TV in 1988

*Risk*, 1988

*Beautiful and Sad*, 1989

## BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

*The ABC of the Little Builder*, 1986

*Where Do the Children of the World Live*, 1987

*Where the Shores Meet*, 1988

## Synopsis

*Life is Somewhere Else* is a novel about the twists of fate, about our grown-up children who choose their own path in life, about the breakdown following first love that can burn your soul to ashes, about the truth that can help you transcend, about the betrayals and the indispensable friendships that do stand the test of time, about the torturous road of self-discovery and self-assertion, about the meaning of life and about prioritizing the values that you remain true to for the rest of your life. And also about the children without parents who are left with no choice, so we make that choice for them for the sake of their brighter future. But is that really so? An intense, dynamic, breathtaking novel that takes you on a journey that crisscrosses many different human fates, so that you can find yourself in one of them.

This story poses many burning questions of our time that each of us has to give an answer for themselves.

*Blagovesta Kassabova*



# Life is Somewhere Else

*Excerpt / Translated by Annie Dancheva*

## Chapter One

**M**y dearest sun, light of my life, my precious only child, Svetla, Throughout your entire life you've reproached me for leaving you with no father, for not having loved you enough, for being unable to provide for your future with a home, a villa and a car, just like I couldn't buy you a bicycle when you were a child, I couldn't even afford to get you roller skates, you had to borrow the beautiful clothes and trinkets your friends wore . . . You wanted more and more and I felt more and more guilty and crushed every single time, more insignificant under the heaviness of your reproof that left me completely devastated. You always were the most beautiful, healthy and neat of all the girls, but that was never enough for you, what do I need this sheer beauty for when you can't give me more than that, you asked, but I'll grow up and I'll have everything I've ever dreamt of. It's not just the boys that give me the eye now, but the daddies, too, I'd choose one of them to replace mine, the real one whom I never really got to see, the one you've never said a word about, you never told me what he was like, why he left us, does he even know about me or you kept me for yourself only before I was even born? You kept adding more and more to the pile of accusations and I stooped under their burden, engulfed by the fear that one day you'd walk off with some stranger who you'd think was nice and rich, but who could turn out to be a rascal, a momma's boy, a swindler or a good-for-nothing and take advantage of your innocence once he sensed your thirst for luxury. And I suspected that was exactly what had happened that night when you slipped out of the house to embark on your own path. I waited for you, prayed to God for you to come back, I searched for you, I asked everyone if they knew something about you, but they didn't, I was half-dead with terror, the only thing that kept me going was the hope that I'd find you, that you'd call me yourself and that someday I'll be able to give you everything you've ever needed. Alas, it wasn't you who called, but a coarse male voice who let me know what they would do to you unless I collect a mind-blowing twenty-five thousand euros, in twenty-four hours at that, I nearly fainted as I listened to him and pictured his words becoming actions, the shock was so massive that it tossed me from one wall to the other and then from the floor up to the ceiling and then back to the floor, everything around me swirled as though I was in a whirlpool and I lost consciousness. When I came round, the first thing I realized was that the time

was passing, the period was too short, I would most probably fail, still didn't you always blame me for not making enough money while other people, oh, other people they . . . So I ran up to those who I knew had money, they just shrugged, they couldn't lend me any, what was I thinking—with that measly salary of mine I could never pay them back. I managed to find Yulita, they had just returned from abroad, she wanted to help, they had some savings, she was ready to give them all to me and to contact friends who could help, too, but despite all of our efforts the sum we've gathered was still insufficient, much smaller than what they had requested. I couldn't call the police either, I doubted they'd do anything, why, they sometimes acted as an umbrella for the criminals.

Yulita kept on seeking and collecting money, she didn't give up, she suggested that I ask for an extension. An extension, for real? They didn't even let me pronounce the word. But what else could I do? I couldn't survive that. To disappear somewhere in the world. And that wasn't just any place, but a brothel. Well, then? What choice did I have? To tie the rope around my neck . . . But before I slip on the noose, I'll tell you one last time just how much I've loved and I still love you, I did everything I could, so that you could grow up a happy child, so that you won't lack anything essential; I could have married, but I was afraid of whether my husband would have loved you enough, as for your father, he was a weak man and he drank a lot, and when he drank, he didn't know what he was doing. Yes, I never told him about you, but not because I wanted to deprive you of a fatherly caress, but because I wanted to keep you away from his blackmailing, he got married drunk, had children, got divorced drunk after he beat his wives up and they put up with that; he was charming and handsome, the women gave him lodgings, hoping they would succeed in changing him, they couldn't, he left them behind beat-up and robbed. When I leave this world, the only person you can contact and trust will be Yulita, but I don't know if this letter will ever get to you. I love you, you know, I've always wanted you to become a good person, to study what you want, to have a job and a husband you love and at least two or three children, so that they don't have to grow up lonely like you did.

Goodbye, dearest one, once again I have proved myself unworthy—I couldn't gather the money to save you! I hope God is merciful enough to spare you!

Your lonely and unloved by you mother, forgive her for failing you even when you needed her the most. "I love you, my precious girl!"

Marina paused. She gave all that she had read a thought. Why no one had come looking for that letter? Is the daughter of this woman even alive? And where is she? Somewhere abroad? Living in some brothel perhaps? She must be around 40 right now, quite a solid age. No, actually a bit younger. Was it possible that she had managed to find a way out without ending up in some brothel, instead being happily married now,

yet, if so, why hasn't she come back looking for her mother? Or could she have actually laid that trap just to see how loved she is? I doubt that . . . Most probably the girl hasn't survived and has rotted in some gutter, a stranger in a foreign country with no identification. That had, after all, happened back at a time when the mobsters were thriving and they had to amass their riches any way they could—women, narcotics, oil! What a horrible time that was—no one could feel safe inside their own skin. Moreover, so many young people immigrated—the painters left for Canada, the programmers went to the Silicon Valley, some chose destinations that were closer to home if they had acquaintances in Switzerland, France or Germany, others tried their hands as hired workers in Greece, Spain or Italy, unhappy was the fate of those who had gone abroad to make a living, but very few of them really came back . . . This has been an ongoing process up . . . to the present. Desperate, despondent with no future . . . so many young people!

That was a grave matter! She was already planning the next episode of her talk show featuring parents whose children have gone to live abroad. She wanted to dive deep into the brain drain, especially after the visa regime was removed, but there were upcoming elections, the general manager of the radio had been replaced by a new one along with the entire board of directors and the Council for Electronic Media, and the general manager of the National TV was about to be replaced as well. The media had to be kept on a tight leash, so that the leading political party could secure its success. Lay-offs were on the line. I wonder what they would possibly conceive of to get rid of that girl, too?

Marina was one of the best hostesses. She always posed some of the most topical questions in her shows. It didn't matter if her guests were painters or writers, or musicians, she always linked them to the time in which they were active and somewhat imperceptibly managed to evaluate their work, concerts, paintings and newly published books through the lens of the respective age. "Art on Air" every Friday, always hosted by her. She always presented multiple view points on all the events she discussed.



# Vladimir POLEGANOV

Vladimir Poleganov (b. 1979) earned a degree in clinical psychology and creative writing from Sofia University. He is the author of one collection of short stories, *The Deconstruction of Thomas S* (2013, St. Kliment Ohridski University Press). His short stories have appeared in various literary magazines in Bulgaria, including *Stranitsa*, *Granta Bulgaria*, *Sledva* and *More*. His short story “The Birds” is featured in Dalkey Archive Press’ annual anthology *Best European Fiction 2016*. *The Other Dream* is his first novel.

## Synopsis

After dialing a wrong number, a young man ends up in an unknown world which before his eyes gradually fills with strange objects and people. Every subsequent move turns out to be unforeseeable and leads him alternately to horror at the unfamiliar, and amazement at that same unfamiliarity.

*The Other Dream* is a psychological novel masquerading as fantasy. Or a truly fantastic adventure whose ultimate goal is to return to our familiar reality. What happens when we entrust our memory and desire to technology? Can we continue to live in a known world? Or will we discover a new one? *The Other Dream* is an intimate story about the time when the future imperceptibly became part of everyday life, and the invisible unknown controlled every human activity, and the distance between consciousnesses and hearts seemed infinite.





# The Other Dream

*Excerpt / Translated by Peter Bachev*

*I am reluctant to tell you what sort of eyes they have, for fear that you may think me lying on account of the incredibility of the story.*

‘A True Story’, Lucian

I first found out about the other world about two months ago, when I tried to call my wife and got a busy signal. I dialed again, and then once more and then, on the fourth time, just as I was about to give up, someone on the other end picked up and started speaking to me. I wouldn't have described the voice as belonging to a man, but neither was it explicitly female; the language was familiar, a mixture of tongues I've heard and even some I spoke myself, but still somehow unintelligible, like a noise machine that counterfeits natural sounds so truly and clearly that it sounds artificial. I was taken aback for a moment but then I thought - maybe my wife had finally gone insane, the way I'd always suspected she wanted to. I imagined her, the edge of the receiver leaving red marks across her pale face, her eyes rolling back in their sockets, staring into the darkness inside her head, mouth agape, her tongue sticking out in throes of sudden schizophasia... It took a long second to shake off the disturbing image, replace it with a more presentable memory and try to say something back. A feeble 'Hello?' is all that I could manage, and even that came out so quiet that the other side's alien sounds immediately tore it to shreds and swallowed it. The torrent of speech showed no signs of abating, so I decided to just keep quiet and listen. If it were demons that had possessed my wife, they would soon tire and leave her alone. If it were madness, maybe I would get used to it and even learn to be happy for her. Yet the more I listened, the more the sounds came to resemble words - I could soon point out their beginnings and ends; tell intentional pauses from intakes of breath; sail the peaks and troughs of the voice's intonation. Perhaps the adrenaline rush turned fear into excitement, I couldn't say. I couldn't say how long I spent on the phone either, only that when I finally hung up, it was already dark outside. Instead of trying for the fifth time, I walked to the window and gazed into the night sky. There was something inexplicable painted across it that night, something preventing me from completing the image, from taking the whole picture in; as if a photograph had been magnified as far as the eye would allow, but a part, the smallest part, a pixel or something even more minute, was missing from it. Whatever it was, wherever it was, my senses registered its absence, but failed to fully communicate it to my brain. There are no stars, I thought, but then again, there was nothing unusual about that - it is what the autumn sky looks like above

every big city these days. Smog and clouds obscure it, therein lies its inexplicability. There had been a brief period, a couple of years prior, when I believed in the mystical. It ended when my wife, during one particularly pleasant dinner party, convinced me that it all comes down to advances in technology, and how it reveals and conceals the world all at the same time. It is perfectly normal to be confused, we've all been there, she said and I nodded my agreement, but I remember now that I also wanted to ask her something... what, I no longer know. I can't quite place the memory either - the dinner with friends, her explanation, the sudden, abrupt loss of faith. I guess I believe again now - but in this other world, the awareness of which spilled through the receiver two short months ago. I've felt like I occupy a larger universe ever since, and that's quite significant in itself, considering how little space we are all afforded in ours. I turned my attention to the ineffable, starless sky - it was not a thing for my eyes, I could feel that, and it scared me. I tried to think back to all the things I had done earlier in the day, to stay entangled in the safety net of the familiar and routine, but it felt flimsy and transient. I had certainly gone to work, probably had a meal - breakfast, lunch, maybe even dinner, since it was already nightfall; I would have spoken to colleagues in the office, passed by strangers on my way home. Memories of the everyday, blurred and undefined, flooded my field of vision, zooming in quickly before being sharply pulled away by some invisible centrifugal force. I felt like a rock on the ocean floor, watching the waves play around with the debris from some spectacular shipwreck: pieces of driftwood washed up close enough for me to get a sense of the magnitude of the crash, but not of the shape and character of what remained. My day seemed unreconstructable; in the deep waters of my new state, memory was clearly an inadequate vessel. The only thing I remembered is that I had, at some point, remembered more. This struck me as odd - I had a reasonably clear idea of my past beyond the last couple of days - I knew who I was, could probably explain what I was doing looking through the windows of this particular room... Everybody catches a glimpse of a different world at some point in their lives - dreams, mistakes, others' violence or love, they are all doors to a different reality, I know that. It makes one realize that boundaries, the solid forms of things, are but chalk lines, relentlessly drawn up and wiped away by invisible hands. But how many of us pass through those doors? How many cross the threshold of these new places? I wouldn't know, perhaps a lot more than I think. I wonder sometimes if I award my discovery more importance than it's due.

\* \* \*

I felt suddenly sleepy, an unexpected tiredness washed over me. I hadn't done any work that day, and even if I had, my job is hardly strenuous, yet it was all I could do

to head to bed and not curl up on the floor. The bathroom lights caught my scent through the open door and sprang to life, but turned back off as soon as I'd passed down the hallway. I turned to look at the window at the bottom of the room I had just left - whatever lay beyond it, whatever form the darkness outside took, it seemed to me at that moment too small, too negligible to lead to the night sky, to imply the vast space it struggled to contain. I sometimes feel like the world on my side of that window is the only one deserving to be called 'real'. It's like I'm at the very beginning of... everything and the universe outside is still unfinished; sitting and waiting are all I can reasonably do. My wife explained that away with technology too, when I told her. There is not an inch of our home that hasn't been sown with electronics, she said. Scientists and designers are making them smaller and smaller, more and more invisible. For instance, what you think is just dust is actually a clever device that monitors your vital signs, pre-emptly your needs and puts the oven on a moment before you feel the first pangs of hunger. I did not quite understand how that explains why everything not within the four walls of our home feels like a dream, a mistake or simply lacking meaning as if meaning has not yet been assigned to it. I still, to this day, do not understand how I have persuaded myself that this room offers security, the kind of stability of the senses that's the only thing left tethering me to this world. Perhaps it's because the technology here is so sophisticated, so convincing. Take insomnia, for example - I barely ever twist and turn in bed, sweaty and exhausted, going over the same thought a thousand times: the robotic particles woven into the fabric of our sheets are there to facilitate the body and mind's passage across the river of days. Perhaps, perhaps. But then why, I thought to ask my wife once, do we still clean? If dust is electronic and there for a reason, why do we wipe it off? Only part of it is synthetic, she explained, the rest is detritus and waste, from our furnishings and our bodies. I insisted. Keep in mind that cleaners are machines, too; you wouldn't mistake a doll for a human, would you? Remembering the conversation lulled me into an uneasy sleep. I vaguely recalled my wife saying something else about a doll, but her words never fully crossed over and left no mark. Of all the dreams I had that night - from an abandoned house, to a former workplace of mine, to my daily commute - one element remained constant - calling her, the silence of the receiver, the ringing, and finally, the unfamiliar language. The call concluded every nocturnal scenario, settled over itself like residue; every repetition made it clearer, sharper, easier to understand. The last time around I was almost certain I understood the words - an illusion shattered shortly thereafter by my morning alarm, beckoning my consciousness back to the world I was destined, or maybe sentenced, to live my ordinary life in. Fate or a prison, but never both, of that I was sure.

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# Vladislav TODOROV

Vladislav Todorov, PhD, teaches cinema and literature at the University of Pennsylvania. His first book, *The Adam Complex*, was published in Sofia in 1991. He published his second book, *Red Square, Black Square: An Organon for a Revolutionary Imagination*, in the US in 1995. This was followed by *A Small Paradox about Theater and Other Figures in Life* and *A Chaotic Pendulum: Political Journalism*. The American literary magazines *Postmodern Culture* and *Chelsea* published his first attempts at fiction. He is the author of two novels that have been adapted for the screen: *Zift* and *Zincograph* (filmed as *The Color of the Chameleon*). His third novel, *The Spinning Top*, is currently being developed for film.

## Synopsis

In the worst of times, science conquers death. A bio-titanic micronation of 666 immortal men is created that will colonize the Cosmos on board the Spinning Top, a stupendous spaceship of brutalist design. The female sex becomes obsolete since immortal men do not procreate. They will take on board only a female body sample kept minimally alive, the new Sleeping Beauty. Krypton, the immortal crypto-calligraphist, must copy and encrypt all the existing books but one. If copied, that book will bedevil the universe. He is just about to toss it in the furnace when suddenly, the book transforms itself into a wickedly beautiful gargoyle called Gargara. She entices him to wake up the Sleeping Beauty with a kiss. He tries that, but to no avail. He is an immortal man of no libido. Finding Kykeon, a super potent psychotropic aphrodisiac, is their only option. And they embark on a dangerous journey to get it. They cross many lands and encounter strange and violent characters and apocalyptic anomalies. On a thorny road, they bump into Karbon, a lone-wolf terrorist who is on his way to blow up the Spinning Top. Krypton and Gargara find themselves running in a frantic race against time.

*The Spinning Top* is a brutal tale in which laughter bites the terrifying, where irony spoils magic, the absurd takes on an iron logic, and language commits outrages on that wondrous creature known as man. The action ruthlessly hurls us into an unknown future, at the limits of human history, where a happy ending is conceived in the womb of darkness.



# The Spinning Top

*Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel*

## *Prologue*

A quicksilver night. A meteor shower spills over the peninsula, veiling the moon. Two alter-terrestrials, the Trapper of Organisms and the Slack Adjuster, had found shelter in an abandoned bunker in an alpine firing range. They had come from opposite ends of the earth. Chance had made their paths cross in this godforsaken place. One had set out to trap illegal organisms in the Land of the Vatoози, while the other had come to adjust the slack in the Valley of the Purdots. They have spent some time cleaning, calibrating and centering their equipment and were now finishing off a can of pickled jellyfish which they had found left behind in the bunker. The trap for illegal organisms and the apparatus for slack adjusting were rolling around at their feet along with a canteen full of carbonated whey.

The two travelers watched the brimstone rain, licked their burned fingers and heatedly discussed questions about the end of the world.

“Stop rattling that tin,” the Slack Adjuster muttered angrily. “You’re getting on my nerves.”

“Pass that whey over here to wash down that vile jelly,” the Trapper of Organisms barked and, after catching in mid-air the canteen which the Slack Adjuster had thrown to him, took a big swig from it. “Want some?” he asked.

“I hate whey,” the Slack Adjuster snapped, “especially carbonated.”

“That’s why your nails are peeling.” The Trapper of Organisms dropped the canteen on the floor by his feet. He peered into the distance through the bunker’s embrasure and stayed like that for some time, staring and withdrawn.

His interlocutor tried to bring him back to the conversation.

“Where have you drifted off to?”

“I’m trying to see something... something there, they say it’s...” The Trapper of Organisms started shaking his head with an astonished expression, as if he had suddenly been struck dumb before the end of the sentence. “Damn it!” he exclaimed, and tried to blow out the flame of the tallow candle. “I can’t see a thing!”

The smoldering tallow leached into the air making it look smoky and shivery like a desert mirage. The meteor shower took on oxyacetylene intensity.

“What’re you supposed to see?” The Slack Adjuster asked with annoyance.

“The end of the world.”

“Seriously?”

“Literally.”

“Right now, in this brimstone rain?”

“Yes, right now.”

“Where?”

“Up there, on the peak of Bald Mountain...”

“You’re babbling, my man. You’re feverish.”

“It has to be just the right moment and just the right angle in order to see it.”

“To see what?” the Slack Adjuster asked sharply.

“The Spinning Top!” The Trapper of Organisms exclaimed angrily, and seeing that his words had no effect, added: “You haven’t heard of it?!”

“Nope.”

“All the better for you. Why should you have to live with the knowledge of a constant danger hanging over your head?”

“Danger of what?” The Slack Adjuster asked, bewildered.

“Of the Spinning Top!”

“Those are just old wives’ tales!” The Adjuster started blinking and shaking his hands as if to shake off the bullshit that had just landed on him.

“Be careful not to sprain something with those, what was the word... ‘sharp’ movements. I’m absolutely serious. If that... how should I put it... **THING** breaks off the peak of the mountain and starts rolling down here, we’re finished!” Even though his words were running in all directions like panicky cockroaches, the Trapper continued his tirade in a dramatic voice: “That **THING** will crush every damn thing on the Peninsula, it’ll splash the sea dry, it’ll drown the rivers’ springs.”

The rain suddenly stopped and the bunker sank into an inky darkness, which the radiance of the new moon slowly began to dilute. An awkward silence ensued. Someone’s stomach let out a sing-song gurgle.

“It’s quiet here, but up there a diamond silence reigns,” the Trapper murmured, his eyes fixed on the diluted darkness.

“No windage at all,” the Adjuster managed to utter, staring at the mute sky.

“You try to catch a glimpse of it.”

The Adjuster took up the invitation and let his gaze slide over the black outline of Bald Mountain.

“Nothing,” he declared, discouraged. “I’m looking and don’t see a thing in that darkness.”

“If you look for long enough, you’ll see it.”

“That’s the case with everything that can’t be seen.”

“Then let’s go to sleep,” the Trapper snapped, “tomorrow is a new day.”

He lay down on one of the plank-beds and fell silent, as if drifting off. The surrounding world was dying away. The difference between the visible and the invisible was slowly disappearing.

“Tell me!” The Adjuster’s voice shook the silence. “What is it? You’re the one who brought it up, but then never said what it was.”

The Trapper of Organisms coughed angrily. He sat up and said: “I have no words for it, plain and simple. Go and see it with your own eyes. This business isn’t like... well, you know...” His thoughts got tangled up in the muddle of language.

“No, I don’t know. Like what?” the Trapper of Organisms tried to pull him out of the muddle.

“Like your mamma! We can jabber away all we want. It’s no use... you’ve got to see it for yourself and feel the awe!”

“I don’t have the time or the energy to go around gazing at the wonders of the world with ‘fear and awe.’” The Slack Adjuster held his ground and after a short pause added: “Nebuchadnezzar said, and I’m quoting from memory here: ‘Of all the beasts in Babylon, only man is capable of wondering at himself and the world, precisely because he has words, and not because doesn’t.’”

“Give me some time to dig into that deep thought,” the Trapper of Organisms replied sarcastically.

“Speechless beasts do not know wonder,” the Slack Adjuster kept up his offensive. “Didn’t Adam name all the things in this world, living and nonliving, filled with wonder at their objectively given reality?”

“OK, fine, since Nebuchadnezzar said it, and he was no flash-in-the-pan figure, I guess I’ll find words,” the Trapper of Organisms livened up, turned around once on the plank bed and wrapped himself up straw mattress as if in a cocoon, and kept talking, facing the wall: “Listen carefully. If you really decide to take my advice, at dawn you’ll climb up to the ridge of the mountain and set out along the gorge of the Heavywater River towards Pipebone, you’ll go a few hundred feet and suddenly it’ll pop up in front of you, something so brutally bizarre...” Here he struggled to wrest another word out of his brain and soon found it: “...so alien and so clearly other-worldly that it will instantly blow your mind, tie your tongue in knots, take your breath away and...” While uttering that “and” the Trapper of Organism’s voice writhed and got stuck in place.

“And what?”

The Trapper of Organisms smacked his fist against his forehead, as if trying to fix the picture on an old cathode-ray television set and spat: “And your gaze crashes.”

“Your gaze crashes?!” The Slack Adjuster was astonished.



“Literally,” the Trapper of Organisms confirmed, adding: “You’re left there stunned until night falls again, when the outlandish sight fades away before your eyes.” He cleared his throat, took a big swig of whey from the canteen and went on: “We’re talking about a gigantic hunk of frozen inhuman music, about a ferocious architectural form. Just imagine a legless ferroconcrete monster crouching at the top of the mountain. As if it’s touched down to take a dump.”

“So, your gaze crashes, you say.” The Slack Adjuster was looking extremely puzzled.

“Lucifer in the form of a spinning top, so enormous that even the mirroring waters of the lakes that drain into the valley can’t contain its reflection.”

“Brutal!” The Slack Adjuster was peering somewhere deep into the outside world, trying to catch a glimpse of the thing in question. “So, your gaze crashes, you say?” he muttered barely audibly and sighed.

“Literally,” the Trapper of Organisms repeated and redoubled his efforts to flesh out the image of this wonder: “It’s as if an interstellar dump truck from outer space poured a ridiculous amount of cement into a gigantic egg-shaped casing. And then imagine that the people on this Peninsula called it the Spinning Top and built a Tower of Babel next to it, which now impales the sky, making it bleed.”

“Making the sky bleed!” The Slack Adjuster crossed himself.

“Luciferesque!” the Trapper of Organisms exclaimed.

At that moment, the Clock Tower struck two. The echo carried the powerful pealing of the bell through the valley.

“There it is!” The Trapper of Organisms fell into feverish excitement.

“Got it,” the Slack Adjuster said, without getting it at all.

The two wanderers fell silent. Suddenly, as if upon signal, a pulsating crunching flooded in from all sides and Bald Mountain began resounding ominously.

“What’s that noise?”

“The Termite.” The Hunter of Organisms tried to shout over the furious sound. “A gluttonous scourge. It’s wiping out all the foliage on the peninsula. It begins its work during the new moon.”

At that moment the Clock Tower struck one. The sound of the bell seemingly startled the Termite, and he stopped his work.

“It struck one, but it was already two, and only a few minutes ago at that!” The Slack Adjuster exclaimed in bewilderment. “Is time going backwards at warp speed?!”

“Relax. The Spinning Top is an enchanted chronotope. It has encapsulated the end of the world within itself. Understand?”

“Now that’s something I can’t understand at all.”

“Nor can I,” the Trapper of Organisms murmured with philosophical detachment. “No one can, because it is the very truth itself.”

The blast wave from the Clock Tower’s strokes was so strong that it drove away the darkness veiling the peak of Bald Mountain.

“There it is,” the Slack Adjuster muttered as if casting a spell. “I can see it!” he exclaimed, trying to keep his eyes fixed on a ghostly oval object perched on the mountain peak, from whose body a high tower had sprouted, so high that its top touched the sliver of the new moon.

“There it is, we’ve got it!” exclaimed the Trapper of Organisms, as if the object had been photographically captured.

“And inside, what’s up in there?” the Slack Adjuster asked with a choked-up throat, ready to cross himself yet again.

The Trapper of Organisms remained silent. He did not know how to continue his story. He had not gone inside – and not just him, no one had.



# Yanitsa

# RADEVA

Yanitsa Radeva was born in the town of Yambol and lives in Sofia, Bulgaria. She is author of the award-winning books *Other Rhythm* (2003), *Candy Dish* (2011), *The Beehive of Words* (2012), *The Season of Yoana* (2015). Yanitsa Radeva has a PhD in Bulgarian literature and is the author of a monograph, *A Promised Circle: Time and Space in the Poetry of Ivan Teofilov*, published in 2014. In 2012 Yanitsa Radeva was awarded a diploma by the Ministry of Culture for *Candy Dish* “for exceptional artistic work” on the occasion of the Day of Bulgarian Education and Culture.

In 2009, she was selected to participate in the Sozopol Fiction Seminars organized by the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation. Some of her literary awards include an honorable mention for SMS-poetry (2007), the Slaveykov Award (2009), first prize in the Jana Yazova Short Story Competition (2009), first prize in the Rashko Sugarev Competition (2012).

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*The Road to Thebes*, 2017

## Synopsis

*The Road to Thebes* offers a new reading of the Oedipus myth. The plotline traces the childhood and youth of Oedipus until his arrival at Thebes, alternating episodes from the vicissitudes of the lives of the two protagonists, Oedipus and the Priestess Dora. The third part of the novel establishes a connection between those events and the present day.

The novel opens with a sacred hunt at Ephesus during which Oedipus loses a friend; that loss leaves its mark on his personality forever. After years of feasting, the young man finds out that he might not be his father's son and leaves for the sanctuary at Delphi, where he learns a terrible prophecy. Oedipus then chooses to roam the lands of the world in an attempt to avoid the fulfillment of the prediction. Before he realizes it, he reaches the outskirts of an unfamiliar city. Local shepherds tell him that the man responsible for his friend's death intends to become the ruler of that city and Oedipus decides to stop him. Following the shepherd's directions, he reaches the place where, as rumor has it, lives an unseen monster that asks every traveler a riddle before allowing them pas-



sage into the city. What happens there, the shepherds don't really know. Oedipus's story coexists alongside that of Dora, the daughter of a Theban citizen. She has been taken in as a priestess in Hera's temple in Thebes, where her duties force her to cross paths with the King and the Queen. After a fire has been put out just outside of the city, a contagious disease breaks out. Those in distress come together. They hope to find shelter and salvation from hunger, but are put in danger by an unknown disease. To keep the waters of the sacred spring of Thebes safe from the contagion, the Priestess and a group of volunteers block the road to the city. At that moment the news arrives that the King has been murdered and the Queen's brother has given an order stating that whoever answers the Priestess's riddle will thus be chosen by the Gods to rule Thebes.

The last part of the novel displaces the mythological layers and creates a link with the previous sections while introducing readers to the relationships between modern people, which are based on the desire to be liked and are accompanied by the perils that come as a result of losing oneself.

## The Road to Thebes

*Excerpt / Translated by Annie Dancheva*

Oedipus got in the two-wheeled chariot swiftly and jauntily, so that his cudgel looked more like a scepter rather than a crutch. Today he's going to prove himself a worthy successor to his father. And the foreigners will join the feast that Polybus is giving tonight. Oedipus has already learned how to behave at feasts and how to judge people by their behaviour at those feasts. These regalements have long become a nuisance to him. In fact, feasts are not meant to provide carousing and chatter, but to test one's interlocutors. For this reason Oedipus has to put up with tending these gatherings as is required of a prince—so that he can practice his skills as a hunter of gestures, the stretching out of arms and the passing of goblets to the *krater*, which, as beautiful as Eros the Cup-bearer, was used to serve wine to the guests. One who is driven by hunger and dips his hands greedily into the dish is not worthy of sitting at the God's table, Polybus had told him at that first feast he attended. The whole night Oedipus observed the gestures of the men and the way they satisfied their thirst to find the one who was deserving, but he realized that after a few drinks no one is deserving. So Oedipus had turned his eyes to the dancers, but he remembered that gazing at the well-sculpted bodies for too long was not a sign of good morals as that, too, betrayed the same kind of weakness as did scooping from the dishes with no restraint or letting drink seduce you.

His chariot reached the end of Laha Street and the ships sprang up before his eyes, resting on stands for the sun to dry them after their long voyages. The masters and apprentices were nowhere to be seen near the vessels, they were not scraping off the sea-shells and the barnacles that had affixed themselves to the hulls. No one was replacing the rotten keels, no one had gotten around to sealing the seams with wax. The sails had been taken down and left at the marquees to be sewn up and so, standing completely bare, the masts looked taller. The caulking workshop, built at the end of the last Olympic Games at the insistence of that wise man Imetocles who had also designed the plans, was already well-known among the sea-faring peoples.

But now there were no workers at the ship stands. Imetocles was the first to notice the Prince stepping out of his carriage and approached him to pay his respects, not just because Oedipus was the heir, but also because he felt him close to his heart. At the centre of the harbour, at the place where the foreign ships usually anchored, Oedipus noticed the masts of the Phoenician ship whose sails were hoisted. The road leading up to the vessel was blocked by carriages, warriors, workers and curious tradesmen who had closed their workshops and thronged there to see the novelties, so that they could

tell the stories for years afterwards and, as usually happens in the end, to make a mountain out of molehill.

The multitude made a corridor for the foreign suite to pass through—it was waiting on the deck for a representative of Polybus or Polybus himself to come and accept their gift and to lodge them in some opportune place. Oedipus followed what he had been taught. With a kingly mien and no haste he ascended the wooden ladder of the ship. Polybus did the exact same thing when he received his guests; Oedipus had observed him very carefully. Perhaps that was the very thing he was doing right now at the other harbour where more foreign ships were anchoring. Oedipus's hand reached into the pocket of his garment and took out a welcome scroll which described the gift from King Polybus—three carriage horses, still untamed. Then, with a gesture, he indicated the walls of the city and beyond. These are the pastures where the horses like the ones they are giving to their guests are raised; there is a pine forest in the distance that lines the city coast like a castle wall. In that same direction is situated the other harbour where Polybus will personally meet with them very soon. Oedipus explained where the guests were to be lodged, informed them of the *thermae* where they would be taken to be bathed and rubbed with oils, as well as of the time when they would be escorted to the site where the feast was going to take place. It will be a garden unlike any other you have ever seen in your lands. What Oedipus meant was that in that garden, apart from the transparent scent of olives, they would also inhale the fragrance of the blossoming almond trees and, not far from the repast, they would see a pond built by an Egyptian master for everyone to marvel at—the water plants inside it blossomed until late in the autumn. Then, with another gesture, he commanded the charioteers to take the guests to the *thermae*, so their bodies could spend some time in repose while the multitude gazed enthralled and rejoiced at Polybus' luck and at their own luck for being the subjects of such a future ruler.

The foreigners expressed their thanks for the warm reception and in turn took out a scroll of their own. In rounded script a scribe had written down what their gift was—a boy versed in reading and reciting, possessing vast knowledge of the old peoples and of mathematics as well as of music. He had red eyes and white translucent skin—such as no one in our lands had ever seen before. The boy went over to Oedipus and stood by his side, in height he came only to Oedipus's shoulder, for Oedipus was not only a mature man, but a very tall one at that, while the translucent boy was at that age when his voice was still that of a boy or even of a girl and was best suited for singing lyrical songs, his fingers had never touched either a sling or a bow, but were very familiar with the harp, he had been brought up to dance such that when he moved no part of his body remained motionless and his legs made supple light steps.

As the royal scrolls were being exchanged on the deck, the day was advancing and the cooks were kneading thin crusts, their helpers were cracking walnuts and stuffing gigantic gutted fishes. The fire was dancing in the furnaces, heating them white hot, the air was quivering, the loaves of bread were turning red. Other servants were drawing red wine from the cellars, pouring it into kraters and bringing it out where the cup-bearers cut it with water. Another group was arranging tables around motley rugs in the garden, pottering around wondering whether there would be enough seats for all the guests. Where should they place the harp, they mused. Would it be a good idea to set it by the pond or to leave it closer to the guests? If it is far, will the euphony of the music reach everyone and will all of them be pleased? How did it happen, the young servants asked bewildered, that there were so many guests, some would think that Polybus's son was to be wedded, they said, and the old ones replied, well, this is a simple feast, of the kind which consolidate unions and cement friendships, you haven't seen much, young ones, you really haven't!





# Yordanka BELEVA

YordankaBeleva was born in 1977 in the Bulgarian town of Ter-vel. She earned a degree in Bulgarian Studies and later another in Library Management. She also completed a PhD in library systems and information opportunities in the parliaments of EU countries. Yordanka Beleva holds several first prizes for poetry and prose. She was twice a laureate of the Veselin Hanchev National Poetry Competition, winning the Special Award in 1999 and the First Place Award in 2001. She holds awards from the National Student Competition in Shumen (1997, 1999, 2000), the competition under the European Month of Culture in Plovdiv (1999), the National Literary Competition on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Ivan Vazov's birth (2000), the Yavorov's Days Competition in Pomorie (2002), as well as the Rashko Sugarev Award. She has been nominated in the Ivan Nikolov Competition and the Hristo Fotev Competition. Her works have been published in English, German, Croatian, Czech and Arabic. She is the author of the poetry collections *Peignoirs and Boats* (2002), *Her* (2012), *The Missed Moment* (2017) as well as the collections of short stories *Altitude of Love* (2011), *Keys* (2015) and *Keder* (2018).

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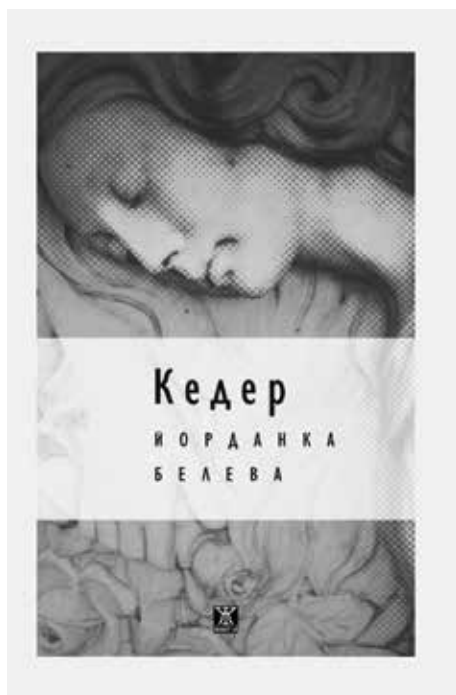
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*Keder* (short stories), Janet-45 (2018).

## Critical Acclaim

“Stories that turn blood into wings are rarely born. Yordanka Beleva’s collection of short stories *Keder* is full of them. They pull you out of the abyss of sorrow, clear your thoughts, heal your wounds. Yordanka Beleva’s words are bright and abundant. Her stories turn grief into wisdom that can measure the immeasurable – the value of human life, of the deep attachment by blood, thoughts, flesh, dreams about a loved one, without whom life is impossible. *Keder* is a powerful book that transforms despair into a path toward kindness.”

*Zdravka Evtimova*



## The Cannibal's Grandson

*Excerpt from the book Keder/ Translated by Kalina Todorova*

**H**e came halfway through the school year and we immediately realized that he was the most handsome boy in our school. He entered the classroom with a football in his hands and sent it straight into our hearts. His shot was spot on, we were already his. We belonged to him, innocent and willing. Later on, all this innocence and willingness would disappear. And so would our classmate.

At first we really enjoyed his company. We were tirelessly chasing the joy he brought us. His name was even Radostin, which means “joy,” and we always used it in full – how could we shorten it to Tino or Rado? Our days, like his name, were long, endless, carefree. We were charmed by every little thing he did: each and every move of his was so light and airy, he was generous with his movements – he played the guitar, he drew beautifully, he scored spectacular goals. We came to love him the way one loves happiness. Because at that time we only had one definition of happiness – a summer break. To us, Radostin was the never-ending midday of a never-ending summer.

But eternity came to an end.

We started quarrelling over him: who was more entitled to own him, to have a bigger share of his friendship. We couldn't agree on sharing, we wanted just one master of this beauty and this master was inside us all. When we became tired of tearing each other apart, we started tearing pieces off Radostin.

It was on the day when someone said that his grandma was a cannibal. I remember the growing relief – he wasn't perfect after all, either! I remember how quickly this relief turned into hatred and I already knew – Radostin wasn't going to make it. The signs of upcoming revenge were everywhere: he was sitting alone at his desk, the boys didn't invite him to sports practice or to their football games, the girls wouldn't bother to look at him.

Then the silent punishments weren't enough, we wanted blood.

Someone suggested that we should make him eat raw meat. Those who got excited were even rawer and bloodier than the meat. They made a narrow circle around Radostin and kept apologizing that they couldn't treat him with human flesh, but only a pigeon, freshly killed with a sling. Then they stopped apologizing.

I'll never forget his arms. He didn't use them to protect himself, he only stooped his shoulders, lowering himself more and more, as if he were landing. He looked like a bird with its wings suddenly paralyzed, then like a baby bird, a vomiting baby bird...

As was expected, Radostin soon disappeared. For a long time the condition that

set in with his absence could be described just by this one word – bloodlessness. Only short pangs of worry made us flinch: we imagined how his grandma, all ugly and scary, comes to our school, starts shouting and we get punished.

After a while, there was only one thing we worried about: what if his grandma had eaten him? And now we wished that he were alive, that he would come back; we promised each other that we wouldn't torture him. We would forgive him for being different, for being handsome, for being talented. For being good. Forgive him for having forgiven us. We would probably start loving him more. So as to share him more than we used to. I don't know.

After a while, we found out the truth about his grandma: during the war, while they were starving for days on end, some people were fattening their pigs on human corpses. Just when they thought they would die of starvation, one of those pigs happened to come to their house. Then both the war and the starvation came to an end. Radostin's grandma survived – swallowing back her nausea, rumours about cannibalism sticking in her craw.

She came halfway through the school year. She didn't have a crooked nose or a hump; she wasn't heavily built or scary; she didn't hiss or shout or have eagle's talons and a wart on her face. Small, fair and beautiful. Like Radostin.

She greeted the teacher and stood in front of the whole class.

*You devoured my child.* This was what the cannibal said, then left.



# Zachary KARABASHLIEV

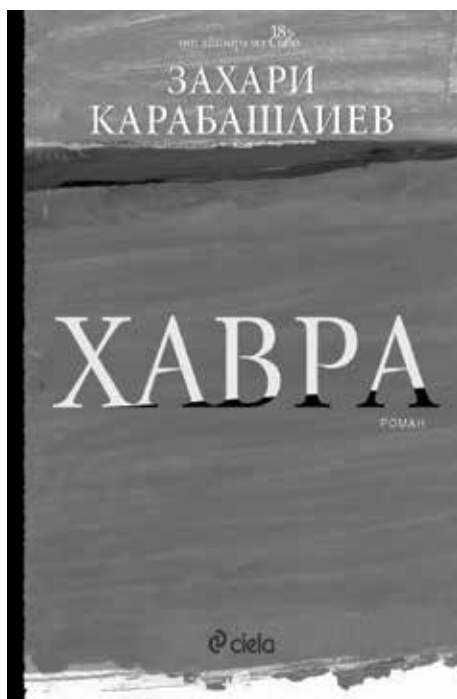
Zachary Karabashliev is a novelist, playwright and a screenwriter. His debut novel, *18% Gray*, is a bestselling title in Bulgaria, published in the United States, France, Poland, Croatia, and other countries. It won the prestigious Novel of the Year Award in Bulgaria and was chosen by anonymous vote to be among the 100 most-loved books by Bulgarians in the BBC campaign “The Big Read.” His short stories include in the collections *A Brief History of the Airplane* and *Symmetry*, which have been translated and published in many languages. His stage plays have been made into short films and have produced on stage, winning numerous prestigious awards: *Sunday Evening*, winner of the Bulgarian Askeer Award; *Recoil*, winner of the Audience Award at the Wiesbaden Theatre Biennial, Germany, for “New Plays from Europe” *Lissabon*, staged at the legendary La Mama Theatre in New York City in April 2014. His latest novel *Havra (Fallow Lands)* came out in 2017 and is a bestselling title. Zachary Karabashliev is now editor-in-chief of the Bulgarian publishing house Ciela. He lives in Sofia.

## Synopsis

After spending years in California and enduring a long string of failures, Nikola Markov (now in his late 30s) is back in his home town of Varna for the funeral of his estranged father, who has perished in a fire. The short stay Nick planned becomes the beginning of a risky investigation, which drags him into a dark web of powerful interests, criminal conflicts and unexpected discoveries, which force him to make decisions he does not want to make.

Almost a century earlier, the young Russian aristocrat Vera Elegina dreams of independence – from her tyrannical sister Natalia, from antiquated social norms, from the stiff monotony of the rural aristocracy, far removed from the modern world and its tumultuous changes. When a chance meeting introduces her to John MacGehan<sup>1</sup>—a charismatic American war correspondent, the two of them embark on a dangerous journey that will tie them forever to the fate of the Bulgarian nation.

How do Nikola and Vera meet through time and space? Can an unusual love affair spark a war? Does the truth lead to freedom or to death?



In *Havra* (*Fallow Lands*), the past and the present intertwine, fact and fantasy mix, edgy action alternates with lyrical musings – with bold strokes and daring intimacy, with attention to what usually goes unnoticed and with a sense of beauty.

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<sup>1</sup> John MacGehan's character is based on the American journalist Januarius Aloysius MacGahan, 1844-1878.

## Havra (Fallow Lands)

*Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel*

“**D**on’t you have a Bulgarian one?” The officer asked, as soon as he caught sight of his name while opening up the dark-blue passport.

“I do,” Nikola replied, unwittingly leaning towards the opening in the window. The uniformed man, with a stamp in his hand, glanced at the gathering line of passengers at Passport Control and tapped lightly on his desk.

“Well then, hand it over.”

“It’s expired.”

The man behind the window looked at the information on the monitor in front of him, compared it to the passport and, all business, lifted his gaze towards Nikola.

“Why didn’t you renew it?”

“I haven’t been back in... thirteen years.”

The stamp pounded the page and the officer gave a tired nod to the next person in line.

Nikola spotted his suitcase among the others, grabbed it off the luggage carousel and pulled it towards the exit. It crossed his mind that when he had left the country at the very end of the previous century, nobody had pulled their suitcases around airports – they didn’t have wheels. How strange that humans had invented wheels millennia ago, they had invented suitcases centuries ago, they had figured out a way to fly from Florida to the Moon, but they hadn’t thought to drag their stuff around in suitcases with wheels when flying from Point A to Point B.

The terminal in Varna was brand-new, still not worn shabby by the energy of countless embraces, kisses, smiles of people departing and reuniting.

While walking to the exit, he realized that his headache was back, pulsating dully somewhere in the back of his head, in rhythm with his footsteps.

It had rained outside – the asphalt was darkened, but dry under the trees. It smelled of linden and rain, white fluff floated in the air around the tall poplars – like snowflakes that had mixed up the season.

He had promised his mother and his sister that he would call *immediately* from Frankfurt when he figured out a way to catch the next flight to Bulgaria. He hadn’t called. He didn’t want anyone to meet him.

At the taxi stand in front of the airport he saw a dozen cabs. The driver of the first one, leaning against the hood, put out his cigarette and stepped briskly towards him,

greeted him and took his suitcase from his hand.

Nikola got in the backseat, they took off.

“Where are we headed?” The driver asked as the barrier for the airport parking lot lifted. The cheerful intro of a 90s hit was playing on the radio.

“To Chaika.”

The driver bent down and turned his head to the left to make sure a car wasn’t coming. His hair – a mullet with a part straight down the middle, straight and sparse – spilled down over his green and white striped T-shirt.

“Did you come in on the flight from Frankfurt?”

He slowed down at the roundabout under the bridge, then switched into a higher gear and stepped on the gas.

“Yeah.”

“Do you live there?” He went on, livening up. Nikola looked at the poplars lining the highway, full-grown, filled out, tall and almost hiding the dingy apartment buildings in the neighborhood on the left. He didn’t feel like talking to cab drivers right now. He didn’t feel like talking to anyone.

“I live further away.”

“So you’re here on vacation or something?”

“My father passed away.” This leapt out of Nikola’s mouth, he didn’t know how or why. As if that mouth of his had just been waiting to say it. The words sounded like a dropped glass. Startled, the driver glanced at him in the rearview mirror, as if checking whether he’d heard right, but quickly turned his eyes ahead, towards the road – there, at least, he could do something.

“Oh, uh...”

While he sat there wondering what to say, he turned down the radio, clearly as a sign of respect.

“Actually, he didn’t *pass away*,” Nikola corrected himself. “He didn’t pass away...” Here he swallowed hard. “He died.” The driver shrugged with a mix of sympathy and bewilderment.

“Too bad. May he rest in peace. So you’re here for the... funeral?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Nikola squinted, rubbed his eyelids with one hand and started massaging the back of his neck with the other, as if trying to yank the damn ache out of his head.

“Actually, what I’m trying to say is that it doesn’t matter how he died, not that it doesn’t matter if I’m coming for the funeral. Yeah, I’m coming for the funeral, but it was today at 11 o’clock, and I missed it because of the cancelled flights yesterday, because of that strike in Germany...”



He caught a glimpse of the driver's gaze in the mirror, tried to stop himself, but failed: "And he, my father, didn't die a natural death, so that's why I said he didn't *pass away*. But he also didn't *die in an accident*. And I can't even believe that he's... that he's dead, but..."

It was as if someone else's mouth had glued itself to Nikola's face and was speaking on its own. As if he had nothing to do with the words coming out of it, but those words wouldn't stop simply because he wanted them to stop, on the contrary – they kept tumbling out, ricocheting around the car.

The driver cleared his throat, furrowed his brow in an attempt at a sympathetic grimace, then reached out and turned off the radio just as the chorus started.

Large raindrops began drumming on the windshield.

Meaty dark-violet clouds, damp as fish gills, were hanging in the east over the sea. Nikola closed his eyes. That headache. He hadn't slept on the plane. Or before that. He hadn't slept well in a long time.

"Which building?" The driver's voice suddenly startled him. The rain was falling harder. Wheezing, the windshield wipers smeared the red from the stoplight across the glass.

Nikola gave the address. They were close.

The light turned green and they continued down the boulevard.

When they stopped in front of the building, the rain was already pelting the roof of the car.

\*

"In the early morning of May 22, a report was received of a fire in a building in the Kamen Vruh region, near the city of Varna. Once the crew extinguished the fire, they discovered the body of the 68-year-old owner of the building, Stefan Markov, a retiree, who had perished on the spot as a result of burns and smoke inhalation. The causes of the fire are currently under investigation, but specialists suspect that the cause was an unextinguished cigarette."

Nikola closed the newspaper. He was amazed at the number of grammatical mistakes in such a short text (was it written by a working journalist? Or an intern?), as well as at his father's age – sixty-eight? It had somehow slipped his mind that his father was no longer young, not for years now. In Nikola's mind his father was a healthy man with a sunny tan and watery-blue eyes that were always staring daggers, in a white short-sleeved shirt, unbuttoned halfway down his smooth muscular chest, in the left breast pocket a pack of Stewardess cigarettes, a strong jaw, white teeth, wiry arms; his father smelled of raw meat and aftershave and was not sixty-eight years old. Who knows why, but at precisely that moment he remembered his father firmly gripping the wheel of their old Russian *Zhiguli*, silent, staring somewhere up ahead, from time to time looking

down on him as he switched gears.

“Mom, why are you washing all those by hand?” His sister’s voice startled him.

He rubbed his eyelids and the rough halo of light from the kitchen lamp over his mother’s head began pulsating. Annie, his sister, had carried in a pile of dishes over her slightly bulging belly, walking with that ridiculous gait very thin pregnant women have and trying with her chin to toss back the black mourning shawl clinging to her pale neck like a giant flake of soot. He felt uncomfortable that he hadn’t thought to help her.

“I’m finishing up,” his mother said. “I just have these left.” And she nodded at a hill of dishes piled up on top of two large pans with rice crusted around their edges.

Annie’s boyfriend Rene was sitting on the couch – her newest, latest boyfriend – this time a computer programmer, rock musician, forty years old. Rene’s gaze was now roaming vacantly over the wall crammed with pictures – from left to right were Nikola and his sister as children, on beaches and mountains; Nikola and his wife Kamelia (his wife?) as newlyweds; then followed an ensemble of photos of their mother Theodora in Las Vegas, New York, Disneyland, Paris, Stockholm, Amsterdam – different places, but always the same smile. Theodora had borrowed the thing with pictures on the wall from American homes. While she was visiting them in California, Nikola and Kamelia had taken her over to their American friends’ houses, she greedily drank in everything that could be taken back across the Ocean – magnets on the refrigerator, the scent of dry potpourris from cinnamon and lemon, even those tinkling copper wind chimes on the balcony – now rusty and tangled up together like family memories. This all irritated Nikola like a badly dubbed film on Bulgarian TV – it’s supposedly the same thing, but it’s not.

“You have a dishwasher, mom. Why don’t you just use it?” His sister went on. Her eyes were red, her face was slightly puffy.

“Because I want to be done faster. And we need to have a serious talk.” *As if we’ve been busy telling jokes for the last two hours*, Nikola thought. Theodora flicked a thinning lock of hair behind her ear with her wrist. She had died her hair, but not very recently. Now it was blacker than it had ever been, but the roots were whiter than ever before. The skin beneath her eyes was sagging, wrinkled, as if someone had clumsily pasted exhaustion onto her face. The corners of her mouth were turned down in the opposite of happiness. Theodora had finally lost her girlish face, her slim waist, the whiteness of her smile, her confident gaze. She had slipped into the physical mold of your average ordinary elderly woman.

“There’s something important we need to talk about. I was waiting for your brother to get here.”

“My brother is here,” Annie said evenly.

“For two hours already,” Nikola added quietly, closing his eyes and pressing on his eyeballs with his fingers. In those two hours they had already talked and talked about everything related to his father’s death. The last thing known about him was that he had spent the better part of the evening in some pub in the company of a pair of mild-mannered alcoholics. When the pub closed, the three of them had gotten a cab and gone to the villa, where they kept on drinking until well after midnight. Actually, the place his father had burned to death in, *the villa*, as Theodora generously called it, was a cheaply cobbled-together building on an inherited patch of land, less than a quarter of an acre, with no view to speak of and unplastered outer walls, with heaps of unused bricks scattered around it, along with boards with rusty nails sticking up out of them, sheets of plywood, metal mouldings with wild nettles bursting up from beneath it, piles of junk, trash... *The villa* had been one of Theodora’s undertakings; since her retirement a few years earlier, she had tirelessly poured her energy from one thing into another, she came out of each new failure with some new *project*, Plan B, which she would throw herself into with inexplicable fierceness, getting only so far before the money ran out and her enthusiasm waned, after which would come the rage, then disappointment and pain, and thus yet another project would become the basis of the next failure, from which she could escape only with a new project.

After the two drunks had left, Stefan had clearly fallen asleep on the couch in the summer kitchen with a lit cigarette, it had ignited the artificial (Styrofoam? Rag?) mattress beneath him and everything was over in a few short minutes. The neighbors woke up, saw the flames, called the fire department, and called Theodora, who had just arrived in Stockholm to visit her pregnant daughter.

And thus Stefan Markov, who 45 years earlier had begun his career with a bang as the youngest general manager of the biggest hotel in Golden Sands resort, ended his life in a ramshackle hovel, alone, charred, and of course – drunk. But to reach that place, he had passed through every imaginable phase – from taking a few swigs at the office through the local pub with coworkers after hours, then all-night benders, extravagant banquets, melodramatic toasts and drunken songs and so on until the early peak of his professional career, after which the friendly hints, comradely cautions, scoldings and written warning began to grow ever more frequent, followed by Party-demanded self-criticism, demotion, his degradation from boss of an international tourist complex to an early-shiftmeat processor at a snack bar near the port, his expulsion from the Party, accusations of negligence and the subsequent six-month jail sentence due to a few hundred pounds of spoiled beef. The worst came after prison – the impossibility of finding any job whatsoever, his inability to keep a job, the loss of dignity, then the fights at home, the rage, the feeling of guilt, ever more frequent bouts of domestic violence, followed by

contrition, then more drinking, new fights, gradual bending, stooping, resignation, total acquiescence to alcoholism, disgrace... It had taken Stefan Markov forty-five years to burn up.

Nikola wanted to stay like that, in the comfort of the alternating silver and black explosions under his eyelids, but the sound of running water from the kitchen sink seemed to grow more intense, along with the irritating scent of jasmine from some yellow gadget plugged into the outlet. He got up, opened the balcony door and went outside. The rain had almost stopped. The drops were tapping on the building's aluminum railings. Evening was falling, the air was clean and quiet.

Seagulls darted through the inky sky. Silhouettes of crows were perched on the antennas of the building across from him – uneven and crooked like the crosses in an old cemetery. On one glassed-in balcony across the way, a fat woman in a housecoat covered in red splotched (poppies? carnations? roses?) was hanging sheets out on the line. Above her to the right a man in an undershirt was leaning against the windowsill, smoking. Below to the left a light in a room just turned on. Even further down a little boy was jumping on a bed, then the door opened and an elderly woman rushed towards him. Evening, frames, fragments of a city.

“Now that the three of us are together again, even if it on this occasion...” Nikola heard his mother's voice and turned around. She finished washing the last two wine glasses, left them to dry, finally turned off the running water, wiped down the sink and dried her hands on a towel with a faded map of the island of Thassos. “So since we're all together now...”

One of her eyes was red, Nikola noticed, redder than the other, she must have touched it as she was washing up.

“We need to decide something important.”

Actually, it was a good thing the flight was late, Nikola thought. His father was buried, the guests had left, the leftovers from the food were thrown away, all that had been left was to wash the dishes.

“Mom, could we really not put it off?” Annie said, sitting down and lacing her fingers under her belly. “We just buried him.”

Theodora pulled out a chair, sat down and brushed invisible crumbs off the tablecloth.

“It's about an inheritance.”

“What inheritance, this is our father we're talking about, not George Soros,” Annie said.

“Yes.” Theodora turned to her in complete seriousness, as if they really had just

buried Soros. “It’s about some land we were restituted a while back.” She smoothed down the edge of the tablecloth.

“Some time ago I received an offer. Some people wanted to buy it, but your father dug in his heels. Even then I told him, I didn’t beat around the bush, I told him Stefan, look, we can only make a decision like this together with the kids. When it comes to inheritance, only with the kids. He didn’t want to hear a word about selling. So now we have to decide what to do with that land, because there’s a serious buyer. I made an appointment with a real estate agent.”

“An agent?”

“Yes, a real estate agent.”

Annie shook her head and made one of those I-can’t-believe-it faces.

“For our family land? With the red dirt?”

“Exactly.”

“And when is the meeting?”

“Tomorrow.”

Annie got up, opened the refrigerator and took out a bottle of soda water, she twisted the cap, it hissed. Nikola was surprised that his sister remembered the red dirt near the woods – well, what do you know. She filled up one of the freshly washed glasses and took a sip.

“This is some serious shit. First, our father was charred to a crisp as he slept. Then our mother turns out to be wheeling and dealing in real estate...”

“Annie, please!” Theodora cut her off and thumped her palm on the table, her voice held a hint of warning. “Annie!” Then she cleared her throat and added more softly: “Please!”

Nikola asked quietly: “Wasn’t that land some kind of scrub? Wasn’t it good for nothing?”

“Clearly that’s not quite the case,” his mother said. “Since there’s a buyer who wants to buy up 20 acres, it must be good for something.”

“So what is it good for?” Nikola said evenly, practically to himself. Maybe it was from the endless flight, from his sleeplessness on the plane, from his lack of sleep before the flight, from his lack of sleep over the past months, years, but somehow something wasn’t reaching him, not his true self, his core. As if something was getting lost in the path between the world and his consciousness. As if things were happening to another Nikola, whom he was observing at the moment, but disinterestedly, as if through glass, as if from somewhere else. Simply observing.

“I don’t know. A few weeks ago the mayor of Krumovo – he’s a relative of your father’s – Radoslav called, and he said OK look, there’s a buyer for your property. I hadn’t

seen him in years. Anyway, Radko said that an intermediary firm had asked at town hall who the heirs were. This is category seven land, the worst kind, I wanted to sell it way back when it was restituted to us, but nobody wanted to buy it then. That was just our luck. And that's why we just left it at that – since then we've been renting it out for a pittance a year and haven't given it anymore thought." Theodora shifted in her seat, smoothed down the tablecloth again and, who knows why, started speaking more softly: "But the mayor said that this same company had already bought up the neighboring plots, and that they'd bought up other properties in the region. They're clearly consolidating, which is why we'd be able to sell our land alongside the others. And now that your father is gone, I suggest that since you're here anyway, we decide what to do, how much to ask... and have done with that worthless scrap of land once and for all. It's clear that in any case, we're not going to take up farming. Nikola's in America, you're in Sweden, and now with a baby on the way..."

His sister shook her head: "Mom... did we have to have this conversation just now?"

"How much can we get for the land?" Nikola asked, trying to make it sound not so much like a question, but just as if he hadn't quite heard.

"However much we agree on."

"What's the going price for an acre here?"

"I think we could ask for around 4,000 leva an acre."

"Then," Annie said, pausing briefly and shrugging her shoulders in exhaustion, "we could sell them, come up with a little more money and buy something close to the sea. We can scrape some cash together – from banks, credit cards, here and there, and we can buy a place with a view. A view of the sea. What do you think, Nikola?"

Nikola again turned to the falling dusk outside. Swooping seagulls and squealing swallows sliced through it. To the right of the building across from them, above the pathway leading to the Sea Garden, above the high maples, in a dark obtuse triangle of sea, a freighter was sailing. What did he think? His sister had no way of knowing that even the thought of him buying anything at all at that moment was absurd. The last thing he could afford to do was buy something. What did he think? In America he was two months behind in the rent on his apartment, he owed a couple months' worth of rent on the bar, he owed money to distributors, suppliers, personnel, he was sunk up to his ears in debt to several banks, on his credit cards, three collections agencies were calling him a dozen times a day. But the real game-changer was his debt to the Russians. He owed Russians money. Or were they Ukrainians? Whatever they were, they had financed the business he was running. And while he'd managed to negotiate some deferments with many of his creditors, he had to pay the Ukrainians (or Russians) back within the

month. In fact, the truth was that he had gone bankrupt, he just didn't want to admit it. It was absurd to keep up this defense, it was naïve to refuse to capitulate. His coming to his father's funeral had made no sense. He hadn't seen him since one repulsive evening when Stefan – in bedraggled clothes, in drunken bewilderment and suddenly pacified – with his mouth full of blood, two yellowish-white teeth in his hand, swaying, but grinning and to some extent delighted with his now-grown son's fury and quick fists, lipping through his bloodied lips *Bravo, my boy, Bravo! Bravo! Hitting your father* – and his eyelids slid painfully up and down over his murky blue, alcohol-goggled eyes: *You're gonna go far. Real far.*

All in all, Nikola had about one thousand, two-hundred and thirty dollars, and it was all in the pocket of his jeans – in a sweaty wad, tied with a rubber band. Which flew in the face of the very idea of America, before he had gone there. America was not tied to bankruptcies of any kind. The idea of "America" was something completely different.



# Zdravka EVTIMOVA

Zdravka Evtimova was born on July 24, 1959, in the Bulgarian town of Pernik. She obtained a degree in English Language and Literature from St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo in 1995. She specialized in literary translation in St. Louis, USA. Zdravka Evtimova has translated more than twenty-five novels by British, American and Canadian authors into Bulgarian, as well as works by Bulgarian authors into English. She has been the editor of the Bulgarian section at *Muse Apprentice Guild* magazine, San Diego, and the editor for Bulgaria at *Literature of the Avant-garde*, a magazine for short prose in the UK.

She has written four novels and nearly a hundred short stories in the short story collections *Stories against Loneliness* (1985), *Stories Made of Salt* (1990), *Stories about Friends* (1992), *A Tear Costs a Dime* (1994), *Blood of a Mole* (2005, Janet-45 Publishing), and *Stories from Pernik* (2012, Janet-45 Publishing).

Zdravka Evtimova's short stories have been published in literary magazines and anthologies in twenty-seven different countries, including the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia, Serbia, Slovakia, Germany, France, China, Japan, India, Iran, Poland, Argentina, New Zealand, South Africa, etc. Among her many notable awards are the National Award for Best Literary Debut (1985), the Chudomir Award from the satirical magazine *Starshel* (1982), Razvitie Fund's award for the best Bulgarian contemporary novel



(1998), the award of the Union of Bulgarian Writers for her novel *Thursday* (2003, Janet-45 Publishing). She was twice the winner of the Zlaten Lanets Award for prose from *Trud* newspaper (2006, 2010). She also won the 2016 National Literary Award for Bulgarian Novel of the Year '13 Centuries Bulgaria' for her novel *The Same River* (2015, Janet-45). She was distinguished with the special short story award from the German foundation Lege Artis Verein (1999), with an award for prose from the English magazine *The Text* (2000), with an award from the English publishing house Skrev Press for her short story collection *Bitter Sky* (2003), among many others. Her short story collection *Somebody Else*, published in 2004 by MAG Press, California, won the award for best short story collection by an established author, published by the publishing house in 2005. This short story collection was nominated for the Pushcart Prize 2005.

Zdravka Evtimova's short story "It Is Your Turn" won an award in the world-wide competition for short stories on the topic of *Utopia* 2005 and was included in the anthology *Dix auteurs du monde entier (Ten Writers from All over the World)* in Nantes, France, 2005.

Her short story "Vassil" was one of the ten award-winning stories in the BBC radio world-wide short story competition in 2005. In 2008 the American publishing house Astemari Books published another short story collection by Zdravka Evtimova, *Good Figure, Beautiful Voice*, and VOX HUMANA, Canada/Israel published a collection of her short stories under the title *Pale and Other Postmodern Bulgarian Stories*. This book is in English and is distributed not only in English-speaking countries, but also in Israel, Scandinavia, India and Germany.

In 2012 Fomite Press in Vermont published her short story collection *Carts and Other Stories* and All Things That Matter Press in Maine published her short story collection *Time to Mow and Other Stories*.

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## Critical Acclaim for Stories from July

“This book is simultaneously raw and full of love. July is a month heated with emotions; maybe that is why Zdravka has given this title to her book: there is heat in these stories – on the outside you sweat, drops of sweat break out, but on the inside you have this fresh, beautiful, cleansing feeling... The characters live through their days intensely, experiencing contrasts. The author has described them so vividly that they get under your skin.”

*Mitko Novkov*



## To Catch a Cloud

*Excerpt from the book Stories from July / Translated by Kalina Todorova*

**T**he sky is its street – it can be as blue as the blue in your watercolors or as black as the soil in the lemon tree pot, remember the one we planted together. No matter what, the cloud is a big shot. The sky belongs to it, it is its father.’

‘So how am I going to catch it?’ I ask Daddy, who knows most of the things in the world.

‘We can’t jump up to the sky, right? When I climb on top of the cherry tree, it seems like I could reach it, but I can only feel the wind and the cloud’s two metres above me.’

‘You have to make a cloud trap’, my dad decides. ‘It’s very simple. You take the big green plastic wash basin Mom soaks your dress in. You set it under the sky, pick a cloud and look at it for ten minutes. Just so you know how long ten minutes is: ten minutes is the time it takes you to think of that place by the sea where you want me to take you, but I still haven’t managed to.’

‘And what if I want you to take me to three places at the same time?’

‘Then the ten minutes will take three times longer’, my dad explains.

I see, I’ll think of one place only, so that the ten minutes go by faster, but the cloud, no matter if it’s as blue as my watercolor or as black as that night I got lost in Radomir, will still be striding in the sky.

‘Not at all’, Daddy corrects me. ‘You’re looking at the cloud before it starts raining. When it does, the cloud turns into rain that goes into our cloud trap.’

I don’t want to torture the cloud in that basin, I reply sadly. That’s right, the water in the basin is your cloud and y’know what you should do next? You water the little cherry tree, which we planted together, and the cherry tree becomes your cloud. It knows everything. If you climb up a branch, you turn into a cloud straight away, then the sky is your street and you can go anywhere. Any place on Earth will become your friend, as long as you think of it.

From that day onwards, I’d always climb up the cherry tree and be a cloud all day long. My sky was made of leaves and branches, I’d cover myself with the yellow blanket of the sun and be able to see anything in the world. I knew that somewhere under me, there were other children making cloud traps and setting out wash basins to catch me.

One day Nasko, that wild Nasko, whose hair was as black as the soil in the lemon tree pot, caught me in his cloud trap. While I was sitting in the cherry tree, he came

over and asked me ‘Do you want me to catch you in this basin?’

His basin was a wooden tub, so I immediately let myself get caught and really liked it. We took one side of the basin each and dragged it down to Struma River. The river was just snaking under the bridge and the fish probably thought: ‘What’s this cloud doing here, among us? What if it suddenly takes us up to the Moon?’ Nasko and I loaded ourselves into the tub and it set off to the deepest spot under the willows. That’s where a goblin was living, scaring young and old alike. I could hear it howl at night and I would bury my head under the covers, even though I wasn’t afraid at all.

‘Nasko, this is where the goblin lives and even though I’m not afraid of it, a cloud should not come close to a bad-mannered goblin.’

‘I’m the goblin,’ Nasko blabbered out.

Although I wasn’t afraid at all, he still gave me the creeps – as if ants were crawling on my neck and my hair stood on end like ski poles on my head.

‘Are you going to eat me?’ I asked Nasko, awaiting his answer. If he wanted to eat me, I would jump with the tub into the pool. I could only swim with my head under water, not above. I hadn’t checked if you could breathe under water.

‘I’m not going to eat you,’ Nasko promised. ‘Because you’re my cloud.’

‘I’m not your cloud,’ I objected. ‘I’m a free cloud and don’t belong to anyone. The sky is my street, the sun is my traffic lights. You, however, are a small wretch of a goblin and just so you know, I can breathe underwater. I’ll jump into the pool, and just so you know something else, the fish are my clouds and they’ll save me.’

‘I come to the pool and howl, because I don’t have any friends,’ Nasko said and his face shrunk.

‘You should have said so, buddy. Here: I’m a cloud, your friend, and I’ve come to sail down the river with you in your tub.’

# Debuts



# Konstantin TRENDAFILOV

Konstantin Trendafilov is a writer, poet and creative director in an advertising agency. Winner of several Bulgarian and international advertising awards. Creator and author of *The Messy Blog of a Neat Person*. Author of the poetry collection *Who Do You Think of When You Think of Someone* (2016), which quickly became one of the best-selling poetry collections for 2016. His first novel *Closeyourheart* came out in 2017 and also became a best-seller according to the rankings of the largest bookstore chains. In 2017 he was a member of the jury conferring the Ivan Nikolov National Poetry Award for the 22nd time.

## *Bibliography*

*Who Do You Think of When You Think of Someone*

(poetry), Janet-45 (2016).

*Closeyourheart* (novel), Janet-45 (2017).

## Critical Acclaim

“You can’t save anyone – not yourself, nor others. Love will always take you back to the scene of the crime, to your refusal to admit your own guilt. Or to the fact that you’re able to live mainly through this guilt. Konstantin Trendafilov presents us with an honest, exquisite and downright sweeping novel that enters Bulgarian history since the 1990s through many doors, but provides almost no ways out. But can there be a way out of the truth of our time?”

*Marin Bodakov*

“Two men’s fates, marked by love. Two men loving different women, but having almost the same misfortunes. They meet by chance, but tell each other about their lives in an open, honest and bold way. Konstantin Trendafilov’s novel soaks up their stories and presents them in a gripping, vivid manner. It makes us understand that when love speaks, everything else falls meekly silent. Open *Close your heart* to hear the voice of this selfless love.”

*Mitko Novkov*



# Closeyourheart

*Excerpt / Translated by Kalina Todorova*

I woke up when it was already dark. The anaesthetic had started to wear off. I could hear a buzzing behind the door, accompanied by garbled shouts from time to time. Through the opaque door glass of my hospital room, still there from Socialist times, I could see strange, quickly alternating colourful lights. Green, then yellow, then green again. First thought: ‘The goddess has come to take me!’ I shook my head to wake up. I stood up, not without huffing and puffing, and made it to the door. I pulled it open and the sounds cleared up.

‘Come on, Kirichenko, gimme one decent shot, come on!’ a deep female voice huskily whispered.

Those weren’t the most comforting words you could hear at a hospital.

The light was coming from around the corner, so were the sounds. I slowly dragged my feet in that direction. With each step, the buzzing sound was becoming clearer and I could pick up another voice against it, a male one. The commentator’s voice. The nurse, working the night shift, was watching Eurosport. At that moment, I calmed down and my imagination picturing the sadistic doctor Kirichenko, hitting the vein on his twelfth attempt, gave way to reality. Kirichenko was the name of a striker in the Russian team.

‘Who are the Russians playing?’ I asked from the darkness.

The nurse was startled.

‘Why aren’t you sleeping? Quick, sit down, you’re under anaesthesia, you might collapse!’

She nimbly moved her dumpy body and pushed an old chair with ragged leather upholstery over to me – it probably used to belong to one of the doctors who had their own office.

‘I can’t fall asleep for some reason’, I replied.

The nurse smiled conspiringly, as if she were about to tell me a secret.

‘It’s OK, have a seat. We’ll watch the game together for a bit. The Greeks are losing one-nil. But the Russians haven’t managed to really take the lead, they just haven’t!’

‘I’ll just go get my cushion then...’

Her eyes popped out of her head.

‘Wait, wait! I’ll get it!’ the nurse tossed her head, as if it were beneath her dignity to let someone slave away instead of her.

She strolled down to my room, then quickly tiptoed back.



‘Did I miss it? Did they score?’

‘Nope, no goals, no nothing.’

‘And Bulykin? Are they passing the ball to Bulykin?’

While fixing the cushion for me to sit down, she kept her eyes glued to the game, as if her husband himself were a centre forward for the Russian team.

‘They aren’t, poor old Bulykin...’ I shook my head. Who the fuck was Bulykin? ‘Has anyone come to visit me by any chance, while I was asleep?’ I asked almost nonchalantly.

‘No, son. Not by chance, nor on purpose.’ For the first time the nurse looked away from the TV screen and smiled at me. ‘But they’ll come, they will. Now, let’s watch the game till the end.’

\* \* \*

By the next morning, the anaesthesia had worn off completely. I had lost my playful sense of humour and my mythological fantasies. There were two things I remembered crystal clearly: Bulykin scored in the seventeenth minute and I hadn’t gotten Lydia’s phone number after all.



# Lyudmila MINDOVA

Lyudmila Mindova is a poet, writer, literary scholar and translator. She is the author of *A Novel about a Name* as well as three poetry books and two books of literary criticism. Lyudmila is a fiction translator of works from the former Yugoslavia. The authors she has translated include Danilo Kiš, Dubravka Ugrešić, Josip Osti, Tomaž Šalamun, Aleš Debeljak, etc. Her poetry has been translated into various languages and has been included several anthologies of world poetry. Mindova has initiated and participated in various Balkan literary projects.

## *Bibliography*

### POETRY

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*Tambos* (Janet 45, 2014),  
*Life without Music* (Janet 45, 2016)

### LITERARY THEORY AND ESSAYS

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## Synopsis

*A Novel about a Name* is a story whose plotline unfolds at a time that encompasses the lifespan of a few generations of characters, who are caught up in ever more dramatic events.

Beginning with the first half of the 20th century, the novel tells about the extermination of the Jews in Old Europe, but it also speaks of the beauty of human solidarity that led to their salvation in Bulgaria, of the bombing of Sofia in the final months of the war and then of the communist terror and the concentration camps, of the monstrous “Revival Process” and the forced name change of the Bulgarian Turks, as well as of how all of this has progressed to this day. All these themes are refracted through the fates of a few characters who pay for the mistakes of the entire community with their own pound of flesh.

Precisely because of the burdensome events that the characters have suffered, which society still experiences as deeply traumatic, the opening line of the novel warns that “All of us, the characters in this novel, are fictional.” But despite all of the severity of the story, *A Novel about a Name* continually speaks of the power of love.



## A Novel About A Name

*Excerpt / Translated by Annie Dancheva*

**M**uhhamad was usually silent and in the cases when he happened to actually join the conversation it wasn't because he wanted to pick a side and say who was right and who wasn't, but because he wanted to tell us about some dream of his. We were never sure whether the things he related had really happened and he just presented them as a dream to make them sound more mystical and myth-like or whether they were actual events that he was afraid could have been a reality. We also didn't know if he needed our support with a "Muhammad, this could in no way be a dream, it sounds like the simple truth" or with a "Geez, such a thing could only happen in your dreams" or if he wanted to tell us something he had heard or experienced in a rather oblique manner.

So once he told us the following:

I'm having this dream that they have sent me to a concentration camp. Well, they say that in our communist fatherland there were no camps, so it got me wondering what would that fascist camp be doing in Bulgaria, but anyway, it's a dream, for Pete's sake. There was water around it. There were all sorts of people there—Turks, Jews, Bulgarians, Gypsies, Armenians, some were priests, others were hodjas, rabbis, industrialists, intellectuals, quite a motley lot. We were breaking rocks and groaning. Building up our motherland so fast that the place was practically on fire. Hunger and privation all around, I don't even wanna talk about it. We're barely standing on our feet, but we have to lug around pickaxes and wheelbarrows. Whoever doesn't get their day's work done knows what follows. They say that there's a pig farm close by. Those who don't toe the line get thrown to the pigs.

The previous night was Christian Easter Sunday. Those priest folk, you see, decided to say Mass inside the camp. You can't help but ask how they managed to get candles from the little shop and what they had wax candles in a communist little shop for, still I'm telling you, there was a vigil and chanting. The old ones had taken Easter breads and eggs out of the parcels their families had sent them and had set the Eater table, waiting for Christ to be resurrected. And we, the Muslims and the Jews couldn't sleep, we had to stay awake and wait for the Savior, too. We didn't even give it a thought. Were we all living behind barbed wire? Yes, we were. In that case, our faith became one—that of prisoners. And we waited for our freedom to be given back to us. The clock struck twelve and all of us robust fellas shouted at once "The Lord is Risen" and "Indeed, He is Risen," but who would think that all that would get us in hot water. We were so enchanted by

the light of the candles that we didn't even hear the hullabaloo and at first didn't even see the lights of the snitches' lanterns. They broke the vigil up, trampled the candles and the food and ordered us to be ready to start work two hours earlier than usual.

The next day we slaved like oxen. We didn't dare say a word, just exchanged glances with our eyebrows raised and wondered what was to follow. They gathered us for a routine check and, you won't believe it, there was a roasted pig. They usually fed us on bulgur and cabbage, as if we were animals, thirty-three pounds was our ration for three months, and, you know, that's eleven pounds per month, six ounces a day. And suddenly, in the midst of all that privation—a roasted fattened pig! Neither we Muslims nor the Jews eat pork. But from the look of it the Bulgarians were completely terrorstruck, too. And before I realized what was on my mind, one of the wardens started shouting: "Priests, hodjas and rabbis, step to the front of the line!"

One by one they did it, their heads bowed, it was clear that this was going to be their last night among the living.

"You feel like having a piece of pork, right? The fast is over, so now you want to relieve the tension, huh?"

The men remained silent. Only the rabbi was about to say something, but they hit him in the mouth with the handle of a spade.

"That pig, when you look at it, what do you think we've fed it with? Mmm? With bran? Bran my ass! Ivan, Mustafa, Petar, Georgi, Leon, Ben . . . That little beast had a good meal, a very good meal!"

My stomach starts feeling sick, but I managed to stay standing, I couldn't afford to let a single muscle tremble.

"C'mon," cried the warden, "you porky scoundrels who sell lies to the people with your bloody opium, c'mon, be the first ones to sink your teeth into the pig. Grab your plates and polish them off in front of everyone."

No one moved an inch. The wardens grabbed them, flung them to the ground and started shoving the pork in their mouths. The wardens shoved the pork into their mouths, but they spit it out. Turks, Jews and Bulgarians—they spit it out.

"Eat, you filthy swine! Eat if you don't want to be gutted."

"You'll gut us one way or another," one of the priests moaned quietly.

And then they started hitting them with the shovels right before our eyes.

The dull strikes echoed all around, the only cries you could hear were those of the wardens, the rest of us remained silent. In the meantime I felt someone take me by the collar and then drag me away towards the pig. "Eat, you filthy swine!" was the last thing I heard and then I woke up in a pool of sweat.

Muhammad finished and then gave each of us a look as we sat there around

him with our mouths gaping open. The meat in our plates had already cooled, the lard hardened, but we wouldn't dare think about eating. At that moment Mitko regained his composure, gave a cough and fired off his reply.

“Look, the greatest pig farm in Bulgaria as of now is the Central Committee and there's no greater pig than Comrade Chervenkov. So what matters for us is not to munch on them. Besides, with this communal farming thing, there're barely any pig farms left. The animals die off, and why wouldn't they when we know that too many cooks spoil the broth? A pig should know who his master is. He should feed it, talk to it, scratch it. But, no, that doesn't happen anymore, all that's left is the Central Committee. See how many people perished for nothing because of those pigs, those man-eating pigs!”



# Nikolay TERZIYSKI

Nikolay Terziyski was born on June 28, 1983, in Smolyan. He graduated in journalism from Sofia University – St. Climent Ohridski in 2005; two years later he received his MA in philosophy from the same institution. Since 2003 he has been working as a journalist for a leading production company in the Bulgarian television market. In 2014 he created the Terzilutsi blog, where he publishes his own work – short and longish stories, humorous essays, political satires, journalistic pieces and book reviews. *Excommunication* is his debut novel, which appeared in bookstores in June 2017, published by Janet 45. It has received positive reviews from readers and critics alike, and its first printing sold out in seven months. *Excommunication* was selected by the website Az cheta (I read) as one of the ten most important Bulgarian-language books published in 2017.

## *Bibliography*

*Excommunication*, novel, 2017

## Synopsis

*Excommunication* is a novel about the broken ties between people and about time mixed up like pancake batter. A novel that begins with the end of the world. And travels centuries back, towards the beginning.

*Excommunication* begins on the final night. The night before a father parts with his daughter, the night before loneliness and terrible pain turn him into a desperate loner searching for himself amidst the noise of the last passing street cars in Sofia. While searching for the reasons for his cruel fate, the man looks towards the roots of everything. He turns back to the middle of the previous century, when a married man receives a mysterious gift from the great love of his life, just before losing her forever. He turns back to the early 20th century, where another married man takes up the path of war and revolutions in search of a song. And a girl. He goes even further back, to a forgotten and imagined time, a time that stretches like a rubber band and curls up like a fetus, that melts away like dew in the sun and which, like a underground waterfall, carves out caves leading to the Underworld, in order to discover that the beginning and the end are one and the same. There somewhere, veiled in the endless night of oblivion, the answer to everything lies sleeping. The years sweep away that answer on the wings of the female soul, which gives birth to the future.

Thus *Excommunication* again takes flight, this time forward towards its own stunning finale. With light dancing steps, women and girls – unusually familiar, unusually mysterious, solitary, seeking, yearning – lead it along its path. Through the years they pass on the word and knowledge, while the only thing keeping them going is their faith in miracles. They sacrifice themselves just so the path of their love will continue into the beyond,





there somewhere, at the end of everything known, where perhaps the happiness that has been sought after for centuries lies asleep and waiting.

From its very first sentence, the novel *Excommunication* steps beyond the bounds of the realistic to draw the reader into a labyrinth of eight stories. Stories about an ancient love, about partings and death, about missed chances and mistakes, about sins and betrayals. *Excommunication* is an unusual journey into the past, into the inexplicable, into the search for one's self. The novel's eight fragments unite in a single magical family saga, a story about the solitude of only children, about the fixation on the past and the illusions of the future, about the rejection of the ordinary and the search for the unique, about the survival of the soul through time. This book brings together the last two centuries of Bulgarian history in order to raise questions whose answers lie not only in the past, but in the future as well.

# Excommunication

*Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel*

**L**ast but not least, I also want to tell you what I remember of my Grandpa Yankul. This harsh and terrifying man, who smothered my younger years with his uncompromising and spiteful character, whom I hated infinitely, it was this very hatred alone that caused me to choose my profession and my path in life, who is now lying six feet under, without me having shed a single tear for him... That very same Grandpa Yankul, whom your mother and I decided to visit – who knows why – one evening, far past dinner time, when we were coming back to Sofia after a vacation in Melnik, passing by that town I hated so much... That great-grandfather of yours opened the door to his three-story house, and met us on the doorstep with not only that painfully familiar scent of old rotting wood, but also two enormous old-man tears. Like heavy drops of summer rain that has burst out of nowhere, those hot tears that sprung from those harsh blue eyes, which were fixed on your babyish face, rolled down his spiteful furrowed face with its willful jaw and thumped heavily on the doorstep, they cracked the old wooden threshold, the rumble of them hitting the ground echoed like a thunderstorm on a mountain peak, and the doorstep shattered into thousands of little pieces and they scattered through the world like the Devil's mirror in "The Snow Queen." Like two bullets, the tears stuck into the ground beneath that lonely house, they cracked the foundations, shook them, as if a volcano had erupted from below. The house, the city and the whole world as well surely would have collapsed if it hadn't been for those two elderly arms surprisingly outstretched towards you, those arms that hadn't felt a rush of tenderness since time immemorial... but at that moment the collapsing world and the whole universe decided to wait a bit, to see this wonder of wonders: this malicious and impenetrable old man crying, stretching out his hands as if for mercy, and towards who of all people? me and you; hungering to feel your babyish warmth and your milky breath, yearning for your heroic bawling to burst like a hurricane into his half-deafened ears, dulled since the Big Bang; longing to imprint for all time in his eyes, those eyes turned spiteful through the ages, your image, your babyish hands, your little feet, and your downy hair, all of you just as I had looked at you months earlier and had wanted to remember you forever...

I handed you over. And he took you clumsily, dandled you with his shaking yet still muscular arms, you looked at him fearfully and his smile gave rise to your most desperate and powerful cry, and you always cried with the might of the African lions. Then he laughed out loud, slowly turned his back to us, as if your mother and I did not exist,

and strode back into his lair, which smelled of ancient wood and old flesh. We went in after you and I shut the door behind me, which had always been locked tight against my youthful impulses. He gave you back to your mother and, still saying nothing, brought out an old bottle of brandy and without heeding our protestations in the least filled up glasses and lifted his own silent toast.

At first I thought that his mind was gone like mountain snow under the caress of the merciless southern breeze of the years, which had also carried off his black heart, his harsh hawk's glare, and his lips, seemingly formed by a single slash of a scimitar. Did he know who I was and who you were, did he even remember who he himself was? But after he drained his glass and quickly filled it up again, he looked at me and while I was busy convincing myself that his cataract had extinguished the malice in his gaze, he murmured: "I've gone to seed waiting for you, my mind's gone batty thinking of you, my lips have grown together from keeping quiet..."

He fell silent, staring at you and your mother, then he raised his glass of brandy again and swallowed half of it down, looked at me, and I, my heart harboring fearful memories of that harsh man, quickly gulped down my own brandy. And I started telling him where your mother and I were going, what our life was like, what we did for work... Your mother also added a few things, and Grandpa Yankul seemed to be listening, his eyes moved from me to your mother, and from her to you, but he didn't react much to our stories. You fell asleep (from stress or from exhaustion, who knows) in your mother's arms, and my grandpa, suddenly remembering to put on his patronizing air, showed you the house's old bedroom and commanded: "Good night to you!"

Your mother, who had been raised to love and respect elderly people, gave me a questioning yet resigned glance, then, without saying a word, put you in the bedroom and went out to the car to get our overnight bag. I couldn't believe what blind obedience the old man's command had evoked in her, but I know now that she did it for my sake. She sensed that I was the important one that evening, she knew that I would never again have the strength to pass that hateful doorstep, to sit down with my deplorable grandfather. I don't know who willed all that to happen – me, your mother, or your grandfather, but I ended up alone with him at a table, between us stood a bottle of strong homemade brandy, which grew emptier by the hour, and while the two of you slept in the other room, he spoke and his voice crackled like an old gramophone record, revealing the dust-covered notes of an ancient symphony.



# Petar

# KRUMOV

Petar Krumov was born in 1988 in Sofia. He studied cultural studies at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski and filmmaking at NATFA Krastyo Sarafov. His influences include Louis Celine, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Roberto Bolaño. *A Hearse, Two Rhinos* is his debut novel.

## Synopsis

A winter resort, an exhausted love, beautiful female legs, an actress with an affinity for cocaine, a father suffering from Alzheimer's, a killer... two rhinos. And one middle-aged office drone, consumed by pain and doubt, trying to solve the crisis in his life. Running away from inertia and pretenses, he gradually cuts himself loose from his comfort zones, only to end up exposed and disgusted, face-to-face with his own self.

This novel is an existential journey, a dark and ironic tale about that sublime moment when in our well-ordered life the questions crop up: Are we banished from the world we have built for ourselves? Is there an escape from the impenetrable darkness we have fallen into?



# Hearse, Two Rhinos

*Excerpt / Translated by Desislava Toncheva*

1.

I was clutching a black plastic bag in my hand. In it there was a live lobster crawling about. I was riding the trolley bus amongst other passengers, most of whom were also carrying plastic bags.

It was stuffy. No one was reaching out to open the windows. I really wanted to take my jacket off. Instead I groaned. Better not to move. It was a Sunday. In the beginning of autumn. In the midst of life. Zinc-coated clouds filled the sky. They creaked as they rubbed up against each other. The light was stuck in between them, barely dripping out. It was almost as if not only we, but even the sun was sick, somewhere far away.

All in all – it was one horrid day.

Protesters were gathering outside, at the square – they were all college students. The black silhouettes of the ones in charge were visible over by the university steps, separate from the others. One of them had a megaphone and was fiddling with it. You need a certain level of political maturity to understand how to manage that machine. The others were scratching their heads or crossing the street with the trivial mission of buying some beer. Finally, the megaphone started working, they organized themselves and the procession poured down the boulevard, right in the middle of the road. I had no idea why they had come out. Maybe they didn't either. Their pale faces hovered along with the autumn wind. They held hand-written banners in their hands. I found it unnecessary to read them.

Blue uniforms and jeeps covered both sides of the street. The trolley bus, along with dozens of cars, pulled over, as if paralyzed. The students came closer and closer to us; they were jumping out of everywhere. They began banging on the hoods of cars, they banged a few times on the trolley bus, too, but in a more gentle way, they were intelligent after all. The driver came out of his cabin and cursed at them.

All of a sudden we heard screaming. The police rushed to one of the intersections. The passengers got up from their seats and lined up by the trolley bus windows. I took advantage of that and sat down in the first empty seat I saw. The police cordon broke. The driver didn't need another invitation and drove off. Other cars took advantage as well. We passed the traffic light and went down the street. In mere seconds we left the procession behind us. I turned around one last time. The students had turned into small but equally unhappy dots, which policemen were rolling around on the ground in

an endless ellipsis. My eyes rested on the belt of the lady in front of me. There laid the truth, I thought.

I'm a clerk at the Registry Agency. Two months from now it will be seven years since I first walked through the door there. I remember that day: it was so stuffy. I was boiling alive in my new suit. My mother was crying – and for the very first time it was out of pride. I began to notice how many people in the city wore ash-colored suits just like mine.

Yet there was cause for celebration. My free fall through life was at an end. All activities I had been involved in until then had been so fleeting. I managed to graduate in Finance with a lot of effort and cheating. At that time I was a moron and completely refused to study. Instead I wiped chairs in cafes and got mindlessly drunk. I thought that that was my duty. In short, I came out of university even dumber than I went in.

As soon as I graduated, I started work for the city parking enforcement. I needed money, but I didn't manage to stay there for long. I was obliged to wear a reflective vest, and it somehow didn't fit my dignity. Once I took it off and walked around without it for eight hours just to see what would happen. I got fired.

I briefly became a stagehand; I had a thing with the box office girl. In the evenings, after the applause had died down, we'd fuck like rabbits on the empty stage or in the hallway filled with props. Sometimes I'd dress up like a pageboy, or I'd throw on an overcoat, sometimes I'd feel lazy and take her on just wearing my jeans. Those were times of madness, of impractical positions and laughter. We were two naked creatures roaming around that dim make-believe paradise. That was until one night she knocked me through King Lear's cardboard palace. Still holding each other, we did a massive dive onto its walls. They fired us both, even though it was her fault. She smashed the tower with her pointy head. She got a lump, which proved my innocence, and I was desperately pointing that out to the management, but the director was having none of it. I stole a hat with a pen when I was leaving as compensation for the injustice.

This led to another grand undertaking. I started working shifts at a newspaper stand. There, out of sheer boredom I got into reading gossip columns. It started out innocently enough, but I soon got addicted. The light would pierce through the pages as I was drowning in piles of magazines, so thirsty for sensations, in a complete frenzy. In the evening I'd walk out of that booth in a haze, with eyes blazing and whispers in my head.

A solid part of my clientele consisted of neighborhood gossips and I went so far as to get acquainted with them and become part of their circle, headed by Mr. K. and his wife, Mrs. I-don't-remember-who. They got together to sharpen their tongues at the Wasp Patisserie. They were mostly interested in the juicy stuff, the small affairs of big people. I sat at their table, poured waterfalls of juiciness at them, and they applauded.

At that time, the Wasp gatherings were the only outlet for my sick consciousness. The patrons there, along with Mr. K. and his wife, were completely out of it. So the next day we'd have to begin knitting our yellow web from scratch.

I also did some nasty things in that booth. It was a metal, impenetrable cabin, bolted down on the busiest intersection of the city, and, since only my head showed through the opening, I used to masturbate in there. I did it a lot, even at rush hour, when people were walking and cars were flashing by mere centimeters from me. In those hot afternoons, my iron ship swept through waves of sweat, noise and cursing, and I was steering it.

I got paid peanuts for working at the news stand. I had to live on a diet of cheap candy bars and loans. By the end I started to resemble a newspaper page. I quit, not without nostalgia, and gave myself over to unemployment. That was until the moment I got a post at the Registry Agency, thanks to a night out drinking with a friend from university whom I had bumped into on the street fresh from being dumped by his wife.

At the beginning I was an assistant in General Administration, Financial and Accounting Department. After four years, I was promoted to European Projects as an associate in project preparation. Gradually, as I advanced in my career, I found less and less meaning in it. In ten years I could go as high as department head, nothing more. Still, I kept going to work, every day for seven years. The building had been located at 102 Protokolna Street since forever. The bleak view from my desk consisted of hundreds of government buildings forming what looked like an infinite graphic representation of growth and decline. I felt neither disgust or joy at the sight of that building.

In the evening, through the bars of the fences, you could see the trannies. Their heads would pop up one by one. When I was working late at the office I could hear their squabbles. One morning I found a blue thong on the street. I picked it up with a stick and took it across the street to secretly leave it on a colleagues' bike. I filled a lot of time by telling that story, whenever there was nothing else to tell. In the mornings I'd go up to the third floor, coffee in hand, I'd sit down and I'd leave after nine o'clock. I'd have an hour-long lunch break around midday.

I tried not to notice the presence of my colleagues. The days passed us by, each of them as flat as the building walls, as our asses dropped stitches. We sat in the subway, we sat at our desks, we sat at lunch and then again at our desks. If we could have, we would've sat on our own heads, so that our backsides could rest for a moment. One day someone scribbled on the bathroom wall: "I don't want to work anymore." Others followed suit, immortalizing their own feelings on the subject as well. But we all kept working. After all, we were mature adults.

In the last few years nothing special happened for me. Everything about me,



from my neck to my sleek bag, reeked of an office. There's no perfume in the world that can overpower the smell of a random person. According to my ID, I was thirty-nine years old. I felt older. I could wake up the day after tomorrow and be fifty already for all I know...

It's Monday tomorrow, an undeniable fact. Countless times one's life reaches that particular degrading situation: Sunday before Monday. I have a huge pile of papers on my desk waiting for me. I feel like consuming myself, so I'd disappear and not go to work.

About an hour ago I had the urge to take a walk. It is my day off, for God's sake! As soon as I went out, I realized that there was nothing to do. There were countless things that could happen, but not to me. I should have thought of that earlier. I could have gone to the movies or to a restaurant, but I didn't feel like staying in one place... alone.

For better or worse, I was already out. I wandered around like a city pigeon. I went into a store and looked around. I tried on a pair of Clarks, but they were too tight. They didn't have my size. I scolded the sales lady and walked out. I was too anxious to go into any more stores. And I didn't feel like parting with the last of my money. It was almost payday. Buying the Clarks would mean starvation. I walked through some stupid parks that were scattered like plates of Chinese food around the buildings. I wound up in front of some monument. You are dead, my friend. I, on the other hand, am alive. Alive, but only half an hour away from home. Too bad. My head was jam-packed with thoughts, mostly short and backwards ones. Mostly in connection to getting home.

The streets were crawling in all directions. A store down the street caught my attention. Let's see here. I got closer and even went in. It was almost empty. It was cool, especially by the fish stand. After a long consideration I bought an iceberg salad, a bottle of white wine and a live lobster. The woman behind the counter was very polite. I parted with a whole day's pay. I had mixed feelings walking out of the store. I headed towards the nearest bus stop. On the way I tripped over some roots. While I was waiting for the trolley bus, I looked in my plastic bag and grabbed the lobster with my hand. You're mine, buddy! Hard shell and tentacles. A smell of sea bottom and fish filled the air. The lobster started moving around. I pulled my hand out. Across the street, the church bell rang one o'clock.



# Tanya SHAHOVA

Born in Sofia.

Graduated in acting from the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts.

Member of the first company of actors who founded Sfumato Theatre.

Made her film debut in a leading role. Still acting in different film productions.

Screenwriter of the produced documentaries *Four of a Kind*, *And We Were Once Knights*, *Love is...*. Playwright of the produced theatre plays *One*, *Two* and *Three*. *One*, also known as *Amant*, had its premiere at Sfumato Theatre. *Two* is running for a fifth season at the Ivan Vazov National Theatre. *Three* is currently in rehearsal.

Author of the aired radio dramas *Services for the Dead*, *A Day that Changed My Life*, *Twenty Years Later*, *Evgeni* and *Juliet*.

Working as a TV programme editor since 2005.

Won the top prize in the competition for a new Bulgarian play organized by New Bulgarian University in 2018.

## Bibliography

Tanya Shahova has published the novel *The German's Girl* and the play collection *One, Two, Three*.

## Synopsis

*The German's Girl* is a concise, dynamic tale of a girl named Borisa who comes from a mountain village and ends up in the big city during the interwar period. It is characterized by cinematic language and fast-paced action. There are no descriptions, portraits or contemplations. The photography studio where the girl works witnesses historic events and welcomes both famous and regular people. Borisa comes to realize that behind any statement, ideology or mission there are just people – either good or bad.

Borisa has kept the habit of observing all saint's days as people used to do in her home village. There, by living so high up in the mountains, people lead a life closer to God – or at least this is what the seven-year-old Borisa and her younger twin brothers believe. After the early death of their parents, the children are isolated by their fellow villagers, who are afraid of catching a deadly disease. Left alone under quarantine, the children survive because the girl copies everything the other women do, observing them from afar. The children are sent to different relatives and have to separate, but the 'little mother' doesn't stop looking after her younger brothers.

The way of life in the village is described in a magical way, stripped of traditional folk adornment. The world is colourful even in the monochromy of poverty. The girl first meets the German in the village – a photographer called Georg who's actually Dutch. She falls in love with him and goes to his photography studio when she grows up. The way to Georg's heart is long. He lives with his son René, whose mother – a French woman who's blackmailing him – he cannot divorce. Only when the child's life is put at risk does she realize what is best for him and lets him stay with his father. After the noble

Zacharievitch commits suicide, devastated by his wife's affair with Georg, Georg sets out on a dangerous journey. During that time, Borisa is responsible for taking care of the house and the photography studio. When Georg comes back, Borisa gets pregnant with his child, but doesn't feel loved. This is something she cannot endure, so she leaves Georg's house, hides among the Carmelite nuns and later gives birth at home in the mountain village. While struggling between life and death, Borisa has a vision of how their lives are about to unfold, then gives birth. A long, eventful life lies ahead of them. Bells ringing.



# The German's Girl

Excerpt / Translated by Kalina Todorova

**B**orisa is doing her usual work. She's put on weight. It shows that she's pregnant. Polly and Franco are sitting gloomily in the kitchen, having breakfast. Polly breaks the silence:

'Hide his money until he acknowledges the child!'

Borisa feels like throwing up, she goes out. Franco catches up with her.

'*Venire con me*, come with me to Brescia. *E-e non mi amo*, but that's OK. *E-e venire*, let's get married. *E-che aspetto!*'

Touched, Borisa brushes his lapel, fixes his scarf and takes her sad, apologetic farewell of him.

Everyone has gathered in the lounge to see Franco off. Only the pregnant Borisa is sitting. Polly has packed his suitcase. She's scolding him:

'What was that *concerto grosso* all night long? I'll dedicate an article on the harmful effects of alcohol in *Women's Gazette* to you - to Franco! And I'll send it to you in Brescia, to expose you there.'

Franco is holding his head in his hands, he seems to be sick.

'*Che cazzo, che cazzo...*'

Georg hands him an envelope. Franco suddenly stands up, starts talking more with his hands than his lips:

'*Lasciate* the girl leave. What is she waiting for *qui, e-e-che aspetto* when you're not getting married *per lei...* you... you're lying! *Venire con me*, come with me to Brescia! You don't love me, *e-e non mi amo*, you can't force love. But *io*, I won't lie to Borissa.' Polly quietly disappears. Borisa pushes him out of the door. They say goodbye.

She can't read Georg's face in the dark. One moment it seems to be scary, the next - smiling, but totally unknown.

Franco is walking away, his squeaking shoes can be heard long after he's disappeared behind the turn of the road. Borisa stares after him.

A sudden blast breaks all the panes of glass in the house and in the neighbouring buildings. A roof collapses together with the chimney in the middle of the street. Franco comes back to check if Borisa is fine. He finds her in a cloud of dust, among the crowd of people, and tries to persuade her one more time, but she waves him away. Franco leaves again. Police sirens are wailing, people are running around.

Borisa draws down the shutter of the photography studio, closes the window shutters in the first floor. Polly rushes off to the business school to check for any damage.

Borisa is fumbling for the light switch in the semi-darkness and screams with fear because she has touched someone's face... She turns on the lights and sees a young woman in a student's uniform. The woman turns the lights back off. They remain like this in the darkness. Georg and René come back home: René is agitated, he's talking about the hellish machine, about the whole dome with the church bell that has collapsed in front of him, about seeing terrorists with black masks on their faces. Georg turns on the lights and is surprised by the sight of Borisa - she gives him a strange look, he sends René to his room. Georg sees the student. Someone's banging on the door, she rushes off to hide behind the curtains. Georg catches her and forces her to sit down on the sofa, while covering her shoulders with the table cloth as if it were a scarf. As calm as can be, he opens the door for the three civilians who immediately peer into the house. The doors to the entrance hall, the lounge and the living room are wide open. The woman is sitting stiffly with her back turned towards the front door. Georg's voice is ice-cold:

'How can I help?'

'We'd like to see this woman's papers.'

'Just a moment.'

He strides steadily over to the phone and makes a call.

'Good evening, General Gotchev. This is Georg Vind... It's an honour to speak to you as well. Listen, some of your lads are interrupting my tête-à-tête dinner with... is it illegal to be with a lady who doesn't want to reveal her identity?!... No, I'm not ashamed. See you soon at the Union Club.'

Georg returns to the group with a questioning expression on his face. No one moves. He slams the door in the men's face.

7.

The house is besieged. The agents aren't hiding, they've become part of the street life, helping the butcher load his goods or playing marbles with the children. Georg waves at them when he drives back home, they open the gate for him and close it when he enters the yard. Borisa is waiting for him by the window, waving enthusiastically, but her smile is gradually fading. Georg hasn't looked up.

Dinner-time. Polly and Borisa are laying a rich dinner table. The student is standing, she refuses to sit down. They're eating in silence without paying attention to her. René is very curious.

'What's your name?'

'Julia.'

'How old are you?'

‘I’m twenty.’

‘How long are you staying with us?’

‘Until you kick me out.’

Georg puts his cutlery aside and insists: ‘Could you please sit at the table with us? I can’t enjoy my dinner like this. Don’t eat if you don’t feel like it, but at least sit down.’ Julia does as told, still pouting. She finally explodes.

‘Well, I can’t enjoy anything when I know that people out there don’t have enough to provide for their children, while you... you people are feasting!’

‘Let’s say that I starve. Am I going to feed anyone by doing so? No, I’m not, right?’

The student starts eating. Polly and Borisa wait for her to finish, so that they can clear the table. She doesn’t help them, lights a cigarette. René also takes a cigarette, without lighting it. Borisa sends him to bed.

Georg is reading a newspaper. He crumples it up.

‘This is not a newspaper, but a collection of decrees! How long are they going to govern us through decrees instead of laws! When this rabies breaks out, it doesn’t spread to pigs, but to people! I’m not blaming you, I guess it’s not your fault, but terror brings about more terror and even the little civilization we have created will disappear! What are you studying?’

‘History.’

‘And we learn from history that mankind never learns from history...’

The student shrugs indifferently as if to say: ‘There are as many theories as there are people.’

‘So why all the blood and victims with money from Moscow?’

‘It’s very easy to explain everything with money!’

‘With what else then?!... Excuse me, why exactly are you angry with me?’

The student doesn’t say a word, beating time with her foot.

‘A wonderful man killed himself up there. He was a member of the White Army in Russia. He used to say that it wasn’t the starvation, fear and terror that made him run away. He ran away because he couldn’t stand seeing the changed look in people’s eyes. This ‘Russian look’, meaning desperate, frenzied, restless, irrational...’

‘Why did he commit suicide then?’

Georg remains silent for a long time, then sits at the grand piano and plays.

Borisa has finished her work in the kitchen, comes in with some knitting in her hand and puts it against the back of the playing man in order to take his measure. He starts laughing in disbelief. She’s pleased that he’s happy.

Julia stares at her belly.

‘Who’s responsible for this? Some sad, respectable man?’

Borisa doesn’t know what to do with her arms. She sits down with the knitting in her lap, but doesn’t know what to do with her feet either. The student doesn’t look away from her.

‘Don’t give up! You can sue him and go to university with the money, you can become a professor!’

The student sits down at the piano next to Georg, they play four hands.

Night-time. Borisa wakes up, goes into the photo atelier. She catches the student going through the chest of drawers. She has taken some rolls of luxury cardboard, a small copy machine and now, without paying attention to Borisa, collects the ‘daily turnover’. Borisa blocks the door with her body and doesn’t let her leave. She holds fast to the copy machine, fighting furiously. Georg turns on the lights. The two women stop fighting. The student collects the stuff, squeezes herself between the two of them and simply leaves. Borisa is looking at Georg. He waves wearily.

‘Take care of yourself, you have to, when you’re in such delicate condition!’

8.

Borisa’s pregnancy shows. She sees a very young Catholic priest to the door. He is very red in the face and so is Georg, they’ve obviously been quarrelling. Georg goes into his office. The padre stops next to Borisa, but falls short of words in Bulgarian.

‘Dear Madam,... this... big challenge... sin...’

Borisa interrupts him, pointing at the lace covering his shoulders.

‘Father, is this crocheted?’

The priest gives up talking to her.

9.

A doorbell ringing. Georg opens the door to two completely identical soldiers. He asks them in. Sando and Michal give him a flat refusal.

‘Got nothing to do here. Is our sister in?’

Borisa shows up with her big belly. Her brothers step from one foot to the other, look away, they don’t know where to start. Georg suggests going to a restaurant if they don’t want to come in. The restaurant is empty, it’s too early for lunch. They get a big round table with starched fan-folded napkins with silver napkin rings. Georg takes them down with a single movement of his hand, so that they aren’t in the way when they’re talking. He orders quietly. He tries to make the boys relax.



‘How’s military service?’

‘Well, how... they put us on fatigue duty, boss us around.’ Sando keeps a stiff upper lip.

‘Who do you serve under?’

‘Under the lieutenant-colonel of the reserve Vladimir Stoychev!’

They fall silent.

‘What are your horses’ names?’

‘Deft the Stallion and Elka the Mare.’

Silence.

‘Do they grant you furlough?’

‘Yessir, we went home to our village.’

They’re silent.

‘How are Maria and Pavlin?’

‘All right. Pavlin’s will be mayor. Lots of children...’

Michal’s voice is trembling.

‘They’re all right, but we aren’t. We’ve lost face in front of the whole village! We’re orphans, but this doesn’t mean we’re doormats, does it?!’

Borisa wants to interrupt them, Georg doesn’t let her, but starts speaking instead with his head bowed, making long pauses.

‘You’re right... I can’t marry your sister, I took steps, but I can’t get a divorce – that’s how things are!... But your sister will be provided for... And so will be the child.’

They are given huge leather-bound menus. Sando stares at the open menu for some time, but can’t take it anymore and stands up.

‘Let’s get going! This is no place for us. There’s no reading this list...’

On their way out, the two soldiers have to go through a double row of waiters. Sando salutes them.

Georg and Borisa are sitting in the empty restaurant. He’s very despondent, she takes his hand.

‘Wasn’t there a menu in Bulgarian?’

Georg quickly leaves without her.



# Velislav IVANOV

Velislav D. Ivanov was born in 1988 in Sofia. He has studied at Sofia University St. ClimentOhridski and the University of Edinburgh, UK. At the moment he is working on his PhD in political science. His views on literature are influenced by Borges and his followers. The short story collection *Images and Reflections* is his first book.

## Synopsis

Are we true to ourselves when we create art, or are we creating ourselves? When do we live our own lives and when do we turn into hollow machines, repeating memorized movements and accepting others' ideas as our own? Where is the border between our authentic existence and fiction? These are the universe questions running through the stories in Velislav Ivanov's collection. Abstract esthetic and existential themes are expanded via unusual plots: a jazz musician touches God, but no one notices; a talented musician creates a masterpiece under his mentor's name; a disgraced man seeks meaning in a surreal Japanese forest; a dictator dreams about having power even over art. The stories open up a wide horizon of perception and interpretation, just as do the translucent reflections haunting them.



## Images And Reflections

*Excerpt from the short story "Disgrace" / Translated by Angela Rodel*

When my long flight was cancelled because of some mechanical problem with the plane and then exchanged for two shorter ones, I myself could hardly imagine the strange story that I would experience and then tell. At that time, I only felt fatigue saturating my body, a strain in my temples from the lack of sleep. Nothing – not the opportunity of sleeping in a luxury hotel at the airport, nor the promise that I would fly business class during the second flight – could comfort me. I lost a day of pleasant timelessness that I was about to spend with my friends at home. I wanted to complain to someone, no – to call them names or fight them, but there was no one to do this with. There was no way to do it either, not with these security measures and constant vigilance.

I won't mention the sleepless flight, spent in the company of loud three-year-old triplets or the relaxing night in a cosy hotel room or the humiliating security checks – none of them could have had any effect on the episode which I experienced during my second flight.

It was actually the shorter of the two and the passengers used it mostly for transfer to the destination where I was travelling to myself and which was my home. To accommodate me, the flight company staff was forced to offer me the space for chosen ones, behind the curtain – to me, the poor academic, clad in shabby jeans and a cheap shirt. Embarrassed I took my assigned seat – far more spacious and comfortable than the cramped ones at the back – I peeked through the window towards the runway and, lost in thought, I watched the thin white broken lines.

My reverie was interrupted by a man in an impeccably stylish suit, who took the seat beside me and greeted with a smile and an unpretentious politeness. He seemed faintly familiar, but from where – I could not say, maybe I was wrong? So many pictures in both ads and films, so many magazine pages show the ubiquitous image of a handsome, well-groomed, smiling, successful man – actually rather rare outside of them. I didn't know if the gentleman beside me was one of those men I'd seen there or if he was so fused with their faces that I couldn't tell them apart.

I rarely meet people like this, which made me introduce myself under a different name, a more suitable one for a first class passenger, I thought. And yet I felt awkward in my simple attire, with my modest means – like an intruder at the Olympian deities' majestic table. My fellow traveller apparently did not perceive me that way – he himself broached the subject about how tedious the belt buckling instructions were,

watching the attractive flight attendant. She was demonstrating how to tighten them for our own safety. While we exchanged such pointless phrases, the plane gathered speed, took off and started climbing, contrary to my blood pressure. My companion apparently didn't like travelling in silence because he went on with the small talk, asking questions about obvious things. When I deemed it polite to return one of the questions – where he was coming back from via this connecting flight – he answered that he was returning from Japan. Without thinking too much, as the annoying headache preoccupied the better part of my attention, I noted: “Was it a faraway business trip?”

He looked at me indifferently and replied in an even tone: “I didn't go there on business. I went to Japan to commit suicide.”

I didn't know what to say. I thought he must be kidding, though he must have an overly weird sense of humor to crack such a joke with someone whom he had met ten minutes ago. I had the feeling that if this was not an awkward effort to be funny, then what made him share this with me? I waited a few seconds which seemed like hours to me. At last, he went on:

“You see, Eugene” – for that was the name I had introduced myself with – “I'm facing enormous disgrace. I went to Japan to die, but something stopped me in my tracks, something I can't tell anyone, but I so strongly want to! The moment I saw you I realized what good luck that was – a genuine, ordinary, average guy in first class; someone to whom I could tell my story! I know I'm imposing on you and I must seem crazy, but would you please listen to me? I hope I have aroused your curiosity and I promise you won't be bored.”

The guy did pique my interest. My thoughts were streaming in way too fast, so I just nodded and asked the first question that came to mind: “Why Japan?”

“Good question. It wouldn't sound plausible to say ‘because it's far away’, right? And it's not true, at least not completely true. Actually the idea germinated a few months ago when I accidentally came across a strange film about suicides in Japan. At the moment it didn't even cross my mind that I would want to put an end to my life in that country. However, when the thread on which the Damocles' sword of disgrace hang was cut, I immediately thought of that captivating place and that same day I set off to Japan.”

My fellow-traveller became silent for a few seconds, hesitating as to how to go on.

“You see”, he continued, “it was not about Japan in general, but about an odd place – an unusual forest at the foot of Mount Fuji called Aokigahara, that attracts suicides like a magnet. As unbelievable as it sounds, this dreamlike place is perfectly suited for the role of a border, of a portal between life and death. I've already mentioned the forest is bizarre. More than a millennium ago, Fuji, which is actually a volcano, erupted

fiercely and covered the land with lava. In following centuries high evergreen trees grew up there very thickly, towering to this day. The forest as seen from the mountain top, they say, resembles water flowing peacefully; that's why it is best-known as Jukai, literally 'sea of trees'.

"But this is not the strangest thing" – said the man, brightening up – "the eruption of the volcano has had a much more important consequence. Due to the volcanic soil there is no developed flora, and hardly any fauna. The trees, lichen, and some random insects are the only life forms. Only rarely can you see in the sky some timid bird from neighbouring areas. Do you get, Eugene, how infinitely quiet it is there? The reigning calmness is more perfect than anywhere else. It is impossible to be in that wild forest without feeling anything but the quiet mountain wind, whispering in the heights. When I look back this seems all the more unreal to me and I grow almost certain that I must have been in Purgatory.

"This sublime calmness – this perfect silence – is the exact reason why this forest attracts suicides. You see, a suicide is not a person determined to put an end to his life – if one has made such a decision outright, he will blow his brains out immediately or throw himself from the first building he sees. That is, so to say, a corpse. A suicide is one who has serious qualms about his existence; who, if you like, dances on the rope of life with serious risk of falling. Aoikigahara gives the suicidal person peace and time to embrace themselves – a day, a week, a month, it doesn't matter; anyway, time there doesn't flow like anywhere else – there they have the time to make a decision about their destiny.

"In the nearby village" – he continued after a short pause – "there are angels and demons. Along with the followers of all sorts of religions, who try to comfort you in the simplest of English, roam also those who squeeze benefits out of the suicides. Little men with officious smiles, offering brochures with handmade maps of the forest – totally useless by the way, since compasses don't work because of the strange magnetic properties of the volcanic rock – tents and sleeping bags, supplies, ropes, sleeping pills, poison and weapons. I received everything I needed for my trip from one of those vultures, as well as an old-fashioned revolver. But the strips were most important."