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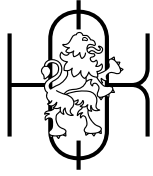
*Ten Books from Bulgaria*



NATIONAL  
PALACE OF CULTURE  
CONGRESS CENTRE  
SOFIA



NATIONAL  
BOOK CENTRE



National  
Culture Fund  
Bulgaria

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VIVACOM, along with the National Book Centre and Peroto Literary Club at the National Palace of Culture – Congress Centre Sofia, support Bulgarian literature.

# Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2021

*Ten Books from Bulgaria*

**Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2021: *Ten Books from Bulgaria***  
National Book Centre Catalogue/Anthology

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NATIONAL  
**BOOK CENTRE**

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## NATIONAL PALACE OF CULTURE

The National Palace of Culture – Congress Centre Sofia (known in short as the “National Palace of Culture”) is one of the largest multi-purpose venues in Southeastern Europe. Opened in 1981, the National Palace of Culture 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 National Palace of Culture 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 the building.

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 European Union.

## NATIONAL BOOK CENTRE

The National Book Centre was founded at the National Palace of Culture – Congress Centre Sofia in February, 2015. Currently, the National Book Centre, along with Peroto (The Quill) Literary Club, forms the palace’s Contemporary Literature Division – a unit under the direction of Svetlozar Zhelev – which is housed within the Marketing and Production Department of the National Palace of Culture.

The National Book Centre at the National Palace of Culture assists in the publication, distribution, translation and promotion of Bulgarian literature – at home and abroad. The National Book Centre at the National Palace of Culture works to support Bulgarian literature nationally and internationally, to create conditions conducive to its participation and visibility in the global literary field, and to affirm the National Palace of Culture’s image as an active contemporary culture centre—a venue initiating, fostering and producing cultural activity in the field of literature.

The main programmes of the National Book Centre at the National Palace of Culture include two sponsorship programmes: the Translation Programme, designed for foreign publishers, as well as the Bulgarian Book Programme, open to Bulgarian publishers. The National Book Centre at the National Palace of Culture has also established the annual Peroto (The Quill) Literary Awards, named after the palace’s literary space where the award ceremony is hosted. The National Book Centre at the National Palace of Culture also annually compiles and prints the *Contemporary Bulgarian Prose* and the *Children’s Books from Bulgaria* hybrid catalogue/anthology series.

The National Book Centre at the National Palace of Culture works in close cooperation with the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Bulgaria, the National Culture Fund, the Bulgarian Book Association, VIVACOM, as well as other governmental, non-governmental and private bodies.

Complete information is available at <http://ndk.bg> or upon request at [nbc@ndk.bg](mailto:nbc@ndk.bg).

## *Ten Books from Bulgaria*



# A

## **ALEXIEVA, Elena**

**Elena Alexieva** is the author of 14 books of poetry and prose, including the short story collections *Readers' Group 31*, *Who*, and *Pets Syndicated*, as well as the novels *Knight*, *The Devil*, and *Death*; *The Nobel Laureate*; and others. Her plays have been collected in two volumes: *Angel Fire* (2014) and *Victims of Love* (2015). As a playwright, she has received the Askeer and Ikar national awards for new Bulgarian drama, as well the Award of the Society of Independent Theatre Critics in Bulgaria. She is also winner of the Helikon Prize for modern Bulgarian fiction. Her novel *Saint Wolf* received the 2019 Novel of the Year Award of the 13 Centuries of Bulgaria National Endowment Fund, the yearly prose award of the Kultura portal, and the Peroto National Prose Award.

The short story collection *The Breaking of Samsara* is her latest book.

Elena Alexieva lives in Sofia, where she works as a freelance interpreter and writer.

# THE BREAKING OF SAMSARA

## Summary

The theme of Elena Alexieva's short stories is human nature. They measure the degrees of eccentricity and quirkiness that human nature can endure, test its foundations when it comes to a clash with absurdities, and give nuance to the thin line between the real and the unreal. With much irony, but also with many warm hues, with a fine sensibility, and with rich language that unfolds powerfully, Elena Alexieva brings together the threads of the difficult existence of these slightly bizarre characters, who always seem to be lacking something, although they also carry proof of happiness deep within themselves.

Prof. Amelia Licheva

Short story collection, 184 pages

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Janet-45 Publishing House, 2021

## THE BIRDS

Translated by Ekaterina Petrova



The first bird fell from the sky at 4:42pm on August 3, in clear weather, complete windlessness, and an air temperature of thirty-three point four degrees Celsius. It was a greenfinch, *Carduelis chloris*, with a length between 14 and 16 centimeters and a wingspan between 25 and 27 centimeters, dark green plumage, a yellow stripe on the wings, and a yellow-edged tail.

The woman, of course, had no way of knowing all that. She had never seen a bird like that, despite the fact that the species is widespread not only in the semi-mountainous regions and plains with forests and shrubby vegetation, but also in areas inhabited by humans, in parks, gardens, yards, and all over the country's

entire territory. She didn't even know that *Carduelis chloris* was not an endangered species, so one specimen more or less didn't make any difference whatsoever.

The woman just heard the powerful thud on the window glass, got startled, and for a fragment of a second wondered who might be throwing stones, and all the way to the second floor at that, since the only thing on the other side of the fence was the other house—ironically, the same as hers—where she didn't have enemies, just an unpleasant couple of elderly neighbors. Then she jumped out of bed, opened the window, and saw the bird down below.

The bird was lying on its back with its eyes open. One of its wings was spread. Its beak opened and closed convulsively, as if it were gasping for air. The woman wrapped the bird in a towel she'd grabbed on the way out and carried it toward the house. The bird started flailing in her hands, broke free, and once again fell on its back on the ground. The woman lifted it patiently.

Such a beautiful bird, she thought. With lemon-colored pants and a gray-green vest. It must've wrecked itself pretty badly. Its insides were probably a pulpy mess.

It'd be cruel to leave it like this. The bird was clearly struggling to stay alive. If she brought it inside, it would at least die in peace, rather than suffering in the heat-scorched garden. And that's if another animal didn't do away with it in the meantime. The neighbors' dog, for instance, which had the habit of sneaking in through a hole in the fence and peeing on all the trees, the shrubs, and even the row of rose bushes. It was a young dog, friendly and dumb, and whenever she yelled at it, it sat down at a distance, stuck its tongue out, and took on the look of a grinning idiot.

The woman walked across the terrace, sat at the table in the dining room, put the bird in her lap, and waited. There was probably something smarter one was supposed to do in such cases, but she didn't know what it was. She'd heard that when a horse broke its leg, it always got shot. But she didn't own a gun and didn't know how to shoot. The easiest thing to do would be to wring its neck, isn't that what they say—"I'll wring your neck like a chicken." But even the thought of something like that paralyzed her. And besides, she had things to do, she was reading a book. And later, when the sun went down, she planned to water the roses.

Now the bird lay on her knees with its eyes half closed and almost without breathing, swaddled in the kitchen towel like a baby, and from time to time only opening its beak slightly, as though no longer gasping for breath, but chattering, soundlessly and incomprehensibly, just as the dying chatter with death.

Such a beautiful bird, the woman thought once again. She felt awkward about unswaddling it so as to take a closer look. She picked it up with all the gentleness she was capable of and went upstairs to the second floor.

The room was cool and simply, but pleasantly furnished. Quite pleasantly, in fact. The furniture was new, made from light-colored wood. The white tulle curtain trembled delicately over the open door to the balcony. The woman laid the bird down on the floor by the wall, climbed into bed, and picked up the book, which she had left open face down. It wouldn't do the bird any good if she kept hovering over it and staring. No harm in doing a bit of reading while she waited. Who knew how long it would go on. It might be over in a minute, but it might also last until the morning.

She hadn't even read two lines when the bird stirred. It wriggled out of its cocoon and, with surprising vigor, set out across the room, staggering as if drunk. It made it to the closest corner and backed up into it. It fixed the woman with one dark, shiny eye without any white in it, or at least it seemed to her that it did. Despite the short path it had covered, it had managed to shit on the parquet floor twice.

The woman got out of bed to clean up, and the bird, still staggering, dashed under the bed in terror. The woman wiped the droppings with a piece of toilet paper, then kneeled and reached out her hand. The bird panicked and rushed off, came out from under the bed, ran into the wall, and once again went still.

The woman sighed.

This is a miracle, she thought, but was still reluctant to rejoice. She knew that death liked dirty tricks and didn't hesitate to play them on anyone. So the miracle didn't cancel out the dying, not yet.

She slowly lifted the towel. Then, clear and insistent, an anxious scream flew in from the outside, and the bird in the room immediately responded with an identical, astoundingly clear and resonant scream of its own. Then followed something that the woman could only describe as a brief exchange. She even had the feeling she could understand what the two birds were saying to each other. Carefully watching the bird she had until now expected to perish, she threw the towel over it and grabbed it. The dying was obviously being postponed, so there was nothing for the bird to do inside the house.

She brought it out to the balcony and set it down on the mosaic. The bird didn't stir. It really was remarkably beautiful from up close. It would make for a great photo. And the woman, who generally detested such things, disappeared inside the room for a moment, and then, having forgotten her principles, reappeared with her phone in her hand—right in time to see the bird jump onto the railing and then fly over to the plum tree, where it was immediately joined by another, completely identical bird.

Amazing, the way it recuperated, as though nothing's happened, the woman thought. And so quickly, too.

But she wasn't disappointed at all, on the contrary.

The miracle had taken exactly twenty-eight minutes. It was still too early to water the roses, the sun hadn't even begun to set.

A week earlier, the woman and the man had sat at the same table, in the same chairs. Everything in the house seemed to her rejuvenated, brighter, somehow more pleasantly and nicely arranged. She had taken care of everything herself, and this filled her with completely justified pride.

"When did they say they were coming?"

"At five. But they're going to call before that. We're supposed to meet down in the village. Then I'll drive in front of the truck and show them the way."

"They couldn't come earlier?"

"I guess not, I don't know. They said five. Why? You're in a hurry?"

"No, not at all. Don't worry, I'll wait for them."

He's lying, the woman thought with a certain satisfaction. She knew he was lying for her sake. He wasn't lying to her, but because of her.

"If you're in a hurry, you should go. I'll ask the driver to help me bring everything in. It's not that much stuff anyway—just a dresser, a bed, a mattress, and a bedside table. We'll manage."

"I told you, I'm not in a rush. It's why I came."

It was hot, but not as hot as it was going to get later. All the doors and windows were open, it smelled of paint.

The gate to the garden slammed, and someone outside gave a shout. The dog next door started barking frantically.

Before they even saw the man who stood at the threshold, the two of them—the woman and the man—smelled him. He was slight, skinny, with an unkempt beard that covered his whole face up to his eyes, and as filthy as a human being could be while still being called that. Underneath the enormous jacket he was wearing, which reached down to his knees, he had on a sweater, a shirt that had once been striped, and god knows what else. In comparison to the rest of him, his hands—sticking out below the sleeves, which had been rolled countless times—were enormous, like shovels.

The woman stood up and headed toward the small filthy man, but didn't dare approach him too closely.

"Welcome. Come in, come in."

Then she turned to the man by the table: "This is Svetlozar, from one street down. He's the one I gave the old sofa to. The broken one."

The man by the table smiled warmly. He was tall, solid, with a broad chest and a beautiful head. Compared to the guy who'd just arrived, he looked like a young man.



Though I wouldn't be surprised if they were actually the same age, the woman thought. "So how is it, how's the sofa?" the man said, instead of a greeting.

"It's great," the other man answered. "Does its job." He remained standing, at a certain distance. "Nice to meet you, I'm Svetlozar. Svetlozar Mihaylov. Svetlozar Bozhidarov Mihaylov."

"Good to meet you, Svetlozar," the man said, and his smile became even wider. "It's good for neighbors to know each other. That's what we're meant to do, as people, we should help each other out . . ."

"Your wife, she brought the sofa all the way over to my place. You've a good wife."

"She's a good one, yes," the man agreed. "Sorry we don't have much time right now, we're waiting for some furniture to be delivered. As you can see yourself . . . But you should definitely drop by another time."

The woman walked Svetlozar Bozhidarov Mihaylov to the door and locked it behind him. The dog started barking again, but quickly quieted down.

"What time is it?"

"Fifteen to four. It's still early. I thought you weren't in a hurry?"

"I'm not. Just asking."

"He's not a bad guy, it seems. But he drinks a lot. Everyone here drinks."

"Not just here."

"And why did you tell him I was your wife?"

"I didn't say that. He said it. And besides, it's better if they think there's a man in the house."

"Except there isn't."

"That's exactly why."

The second bird fell from the sky at 3:22pm on August 7, in the same weather conditions, and an air temperature of thirty-five point one degrees Celsius. It was a *Sylvia curruca*, a lesser whitethroat, with a length between 11 and 13 centimeters and a wingspan between 17 and 19 centimeters, a gray head, light gray back and wings, and completely white chest and belly. Both birds belonged to the Passeriformes order, though *Sylvia curruca* wintered in Africa while *Carduelis chloris* did not.

This time the thud came from the kitchen window. It was not as loud as the first one but it was still loud enough to startle a person. The woman, who was sitting in the living room, heard it and immediately knew what it was. Without any doubt. She did not hesitate, even though a second bird falling from the sky in a span of just three days seemed, to put it mildly, strange. Quickly, though without rushing like a lunatic as she had the first time, she ran to the pantry, grabbed an old t-shirt that she used as a rag, and came out into the garden. She surprised herself, surprised that her brain was working automatically without having to think, surprised by the

preciseness and composure of all her movements, by her inner mobilization, but also by the deep resignation, which bordered on indifference, of the kind that doctors and firefighters probably experience whenever they fight to save somebody's life.

The little bird she found down below was gray and tiny, even smaller than a sparrow. It could easily fit in the palm of her hand. It looked to her like a little mouse, probably because of its coloring. It did none of the things that the previous bird had done: it didn't flail, didn't twist its head, didn't dramatically struggle for air, didn't even appear to have noticed the colossal outline of its savior, which was hanging over it. To her—but mostly to its own—relief, the little bird simply closed its eyes and died.

Now she had the opportunity to examine it as closely as she liked, though there wasn't that much to examine. It was just an ordinary gray bird, without even a single spot of color. It didn't have any sort of pattern, or hue, or lush plumage to make it more attractive. Well, perhaps it had made some sort of pleasant sound, of the kind that—due to a lack of imagination—is described as "singing," but that was now over.

The only thing left for her to do was bury it in some faraway corner of the garden. The woman, of course, knew that burying a dead bird, and such a small one at that, was complete nonsense, but at these temperatures it would quickly start to rot and stink, and this was something she couldn't allow.

For a moment, she wondered where all dead birds go when they die, which probably happens every minute of every hour, so really, birds should be falling from the sky not just from time to time, but raining down constantly, over both deserted and inhabited areas, regardless of their geographical specificities and locations—but that, in fact, was an issue that she did not care about whatsoever.

What probably happens, she told herself, is that some other animals eat them, like the neighbors' dumb dog. And that's why we never see them.

Then she decided against it.

And what if it was still . . . ?

It's true that the bird looked completely dead, but the woman had no way of being sure. She couldn't, for instance, press her ear against its chest—firstly, because the bird itself was about the size of her ear. And secondly, because she had no idea what a bird's heart was supposed to sound like.

(She remembered: at school, they'd learned that birds originated from dinosaurs. At this point, that didn't seem to her that far-fetched.)

She picked up the bird with the rag, careful not to touch it, carried it inside, and set it down on the table. She felt like she needed to give it a chance.

Half an hour later, she carried it back out and dropped it into the tall grass on the other side of the garden gate, where the neighbors' dog would surely find it.

Svetlozar Bozhidarov Mihaylov had two sons: Koko and another one. Koko was feeble-minded and followed his father everywhere. The woman saw the other son only when she went over to their place to drop off the sofa. Both of them looked exactly like their father, though the feeble-minded son also had a beard like his dad's, while the other one didn't. And yet, the beardless son frightened the woman as soon as she saw him, while the feeble-minded one didn't.

She knew them, the father and his feeble-minded son, from before. Two years earlier, they had come to dig a grave for her dead dog. Her dog wasn't like that of the neighbors, not some half-witted mongrel. It was a purebred—enormous, sensitive and elegant, a real prince. At the end of its otherwise happy and contented life, the dog had become seriously sick and then died after great suffering. The woman was grateful that at least she had somewhere to bury it. She and the dog had spent many happy moments in that house and its garden.

It was the end of February, during a mild winter. They'd used a wheelbarrow to bring the dog from the car to where they were going to bury it. Now it lay in her lap, relaxed and peaceful, as though it were sleeping. It hadn't slept so deeply and calmly in months. The woman kept caressing its head and kissing its forehead, which was already growing cold. At first, she tried to hide her tears, but then she gave up.

The grave was supposed to be deep and as large as a person's. She didn't think that the two scrawny men, who were no bigger than she was, would manage, but they dug diligently, with a kind of quiet solemnity that befitted the situation completely.

"Very beautiful dog," Svetlozar Bozhidarov Mihaylov muttered.

From time to time, his feeble-minded son paused, leaned on his shovel, and smiled distractedly. "Keep digging, son, keep digging, so we can be done here."

In response, the son always gave his father a trusting look full of childish adoration, and then obediently continued.

On the other side of the wire fence, which separated the yard from the neighbors to that side, a white rooster strutted about, holding its head high and listening intently. The low sun, already on its way toward the snowless horizon, gazed into the fresh grave with a cool curiosity.

The woman hadn't seen such a dignified funeral, not even for a human being.

After they lowered the dog into the hole and then filled it with earth, she gave the father and son fifty levs each. It was way too much money for that kind of job, but she didn't want to be cheap. She'd made up her mind. Then she went down to the cellar, filled a sac with red apples, and gave it to the feeble-minded son.

That was the last time she'd sought them out.

After she started spending more time at the house, the woman developed the habit of locking the gate, even during the day. And not because she was scared, but because she wanted to spare herself unwanted visitors. In the countryside, an unlocked door was as good as an open invitation. Once, she'd found a woman she barely knew in the garden and whom she'd never exchanged more than a few words with. Another time, the loud-mouthed inspector had burst in, woken her up and before she could come to her senses, rushed her into letting him inspect the water meters.

It's not that she felt safer when the house was locked. She simply lived there.

One afternoon, someone knocked on the gate. The woman heard the knocks clearly, followed by someone's incoherent ranting on the other side of the fence. She hesitated. She didn't feel like seeing anyone, but some inexplicable force, that of her own confusion, pushed her outside and made her open the gate.

Standing there in front of it was Svetlozar Bozhidarov Mihaylov.

He wasn't drunk, or at least didn't seem to be. The woman got flustered. She wasn't dressed for company, not in this heat. Her face was a mess, and her hair was in disarray. She'd needed to dye it for a while now.

"Come in."

"Thought I'd drop by. I was just down there, promised some people I'd do some work for them."

The slight filthy man squeezed his way into the house.

She invited him to sit down in the kitchen. She'd just cleaned the dining and the living rooms. The polished parquet floors shone, the cushions she'd puffed were lined across the new sofa like soldiers.

"Sorry," she said. "Just got done mopping, it's still wet."

Svetlozar Bozhidarov Mihaylov accepted her apology in silence.

"And where's mister? Is mister here?"

The woman pondered his question for a moment. She didn't understand what he was asking. Maybe he had been drinking, after all.

Then she realized.

"No," she replied. "Mister's not here. He went back to the city, he's got stuff to do there."

The man nodded.

"Well, if he's not here . . ."

But he didn't move or get up to leave.

The woman felt obligated to carry on the pointless conversation.

"How's everyone at home?"

The man shrugged.

“We’re all . . . we’re fine.”

She knew what he’d come for, but it was out of the question that she’d offer him any. She wouldn’t be able to get rid of him if she did. And she didn’t keep any rakia in the house, anyway. She had some whiskey and some gin, and a little bit of expensive cognac, left at the bottom of the bottle. It was “mister” who’d brought it. A long, long time ago. The woman was saving it for special occasions.

She didn’t ask him if he wanted any coffee. It would’ve sounded like she was mocking him. And besides, there was no guarantee Svetlozar Bozhidarov Mihaylov would turn down the offer.

“I have some work for you as well,” she said. “In the garden. Some overgrown shrubs need to be cleared. But later on, not now. I’ll let you know when I get to them.”

The man nodded again.

They remained there silently for a while—she, standing behind his back, as though keeping watch, and he, sitting on the battered stool which she never sat on, but only climbed on when she needed to reach for something up high.

She thought back to the time she’d taken the sofa to him. She remembered how surprised she was when she saw his house, which she’d expected to be a crumbling shack, but it wasn’t. It was a solid, three-story house, bigger than her own. True, its brick walls had never been finished with plaster or painted, its railings were rusty, and the glass in many of the windows was broken, but it was a real house nevertheless. She also remembered the woman, the mother of the two boys, the feeble-minded one and the beardless one, who looked like a man herself, with her square expressionless face and her gray, closely chopped hair—the mother who did not smile even once as she watched her men excitedly fussing around the rickety sofa, which had arrived as a gift from fate. Later, someone in the village had told her that it wasn’t him who’d built the house, that he’d inherited it from his wife’s brother, but that didn’t matter. Her house was also inherited. She hadn’t built it herself.

Sometimes she woke up in the middle of the night and thought about it until dawn. She tossed around in her bed made of light wood, suffocated in her goose-down covers, twisted her satin sheets, and racked her brain about whom she should leave it to. Not years from now. Tomorrow. Right away. She was younger than all her potential heirs, could never feel at peace in the pleasantly furnished room, innocent in a girly way, where the night wind inflated the tulle curtain, and it seemed to her that there was somebody there.

There was no point in asking him.

He had his own house. Bigger than her own.

Svetlozar Bozhidarov Mihaylov finally stood up to leave. She could hardly restrain

herself from opening the window immediately. Once he was gone, she’d have to not only air out the kitchen but open the windows everywhere, so as to create a draft through the whole house.

“Is he coming back soon?”

“Who?”

“Your husband.”

“When he finishes all he has to do, he’ll come back. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’ll come by again. For that job, in the garden.”

Of course. For the garden. But if he thought she’d serve him rakia . . .

She slammed the door behind him, then turned the key all the way.

Across, on the other side of the street, which was not really a street but a rough, gravel-covered road, the feeble-minded Koko squatted while waiting for his father—as soon as he heard the gate slamming, he lifted his adoring gaze.

The next day, when the heat was at its worst, there was a knock on the gate again. The neighbors’ mutt started barking wildly. The woman heard its chain rattling like mad as it pulled and pulled in the direction of the street.

I hope the chain breaks, she thought.

The intruder stood at her gate and screamed at the top of his lungs, incomprehensibly and threateningly, and the woman couldn’t figure out whether his screams were addressed at her or whether he was squabbling with the dog. She was able to make out some slurred curse, which was then followed by another. Everything else he mumbled was unintelligible.

She had the feeling the whole village could hear.

Quietly, she locked the front door of the house, went upstairs, entered her room, and closed the door. This was as far away as she could escape.

The next day it happened again.

The woman wasn’t afraid, no. All she wanted was for it to stop. She could always call “mister.” He’d take care of it. But she rejected the idea immediately.

What kind of nonsense would that be, she said to herself. I’m not going to start calling him to come save me every time someone knocks on my door, am I? That would be an embarrassment.

She was sure that Svetlozar Bozhidarov Mihaylov didn’t mean her any harm. She kept telling herself that he wasn’t a bad person, this ruined father of two sons—the messed up one and the other, who supposedly wasn’t messed up (though there was something frightening about him, something strange in his face, beastly, but that didn’t make him a criminal, did it?), this harmless village drunk and penniless pauper, despite his big house, or even precisely because of it.

And how could she forget the decency with which he'd behaved when they buried her dog? She had to talk to him, plain and simple. She would be friendly but firm. She'd explain he was bothering her, and that she would come look for him when she had work to be done. Without any rudeness, without threats. If she had to, as a sign of good will, she'd give him something else as a gift. She had plenty of junk in the house. The old vacuum cleaner, for instance, which had stopped working after the renovations, so she planned to buy a new one during her next visit to the city. The problem with it probably wasn't serious, and he'd surely find someone to fix it. Or the cooking stove, which had been installed in the kitchen when the house was built, though it was old even then, since they'd already used it for years in their apartment in the city. She intended to replace it, too, even though there was nothing wrong with it. It worked fine, except the burners were so corroded that they crumbled and fell apart at every touch. As a last resort, she could offer him some money—under the pretense of an advance payment for clearing out the garden.

Of course, she wouldn't let him set foot in the garden. Or in the house.

The woman calmed down and waited.

But Svetlozar Bozhidarov Mihaylov never showed up again.

She would sometimes see the feeble-minded Koko wandering down the street. The dog always barked at him, and he responded with incoherent screams and curses, just like his father. The woman tried to ignore him.

That poor feeble-minded boy, she thought. Maybe, at some point, there had been a way to help him. But now it was too late.

The summer ended and she went back to the city. She felt well rested. She'd stopped waking up in the middle of the night and wondering whom to leave the house to—she, who was still so young. She loved it, it was dear to her. And yet, it had been built for another life, by other people. And there was no other life that the woman could give it. There were no other people either.

And she didn't have to look for them or wait for them at all, there was a much easier way.

I could always sell it, she would think. Always.

Then she would close her eyes and sleep the dreamless sleep of the dead, all the way through to morning.



## APOSTOLOVA, Antonia

**Antonia Apostolova** was born in Burgas, where she graduated from the English Language High School and published her first book—the poetry collection *Salty Apple* (1994). She graduated with a Master's in English Philology from Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, then spent the next fifteen years working as an editor and journalist in leading Bulgarian media, including the Bulgarian National Radio, Netinfo, and BIT TV.

After leaving the corporate world for good, she founded her own media dedicated to books: the website and Facebook page *Literaturni razgovori* [Literary Conversations], where she publishes reviews of newly published books in Bulgaria, interviews with writers, news about upcoming titles, and translations of Israeli poetry, with the aim of popularizing it in Bulgaria. Her translation of the Israeli poet Amir Or's collection *Language Says* was published by DA poetry publishing house in 2017.

Antonia Apostolova's second book, the short story collection *Sinking in the Dead Sea* was published by Janet 45 in 2020. It received the Yordan Radichkov Literary Award for prose debut in the short story category and was included in the short list of the Culture Portal literary awards. Her latest book, the novel *We Who Are Not Here* was published by Janet 45 in 2021. It was nominated for the Peroto Literary Award in the prose category.

Antonia Apostolova regularly publishes literary critiques and interviews with literary professionals in the *Literaturen vestnik* newspaper. She also reviews and edits literary manuscripts.

## WE WHO ARE NOT HERE

### Summary



*We Who Are Not Here* is an autofictional novel divided into two parts—each part is named after and narrated by one of the book's two main protagonists. The novel follows the relationship between two sixteen-year-olds—Martin and Antonia—which unfolds in 1994: in his case, the story is told retrospectively, from his point of view in the present, while in her case, it is told in the form of the letters she wrote to him during that year.

The first part of the novel, "Martin", consists of a tense confession in the form of a monological dialogue. The narrator traces the events surrounding his encounter with the girl, their relationship, and her loss, all the while addressing Antonia as "you." It is through the prism

of this painfully detailed poetic dissection that the adult Martin now remembers that past love, which has marked him forever. His narrative reveals the road to his spiritual maturity, his sexual awakening, and his dedication to something that turns into his unexpected home. Martin's narrative begins when he first meets Antonia and ends at a turning point in both of their lives—her probable, though not categorically proven death.

Against the background of this confession of love and the spiritual dissection of both of their conditions, Martin also recounts the story of his ordinary, dysfunctional, divided family: his fantasies of how his own death would bring his family closer and make them care; the jealousy he felt towards his little brother; the inevitable "exchange of genes" with his parents while he searched for his own identity; and the corner of his own childish loneliness, in which he'd grown to feel comfortable.

These main themes are supplemented by other themes as well: about the salvation one finds in books and in one's imagination, about the different kinds of escapes, about sexual awakening and its often awkward and misguided forays, about unavoidable transgressions, about friendship and betrayal. The book is also a confession of love to Martin's biggest passions: astronomy and science fiction, which are also heavily present in the novel—through all the mentions of the names of scientists, magazines, books, and excerpts that were popular at the time. Martin transforms their terminology into a poetic metaphor for the cosmic scale of his love, which permeates the whole novel.

The first part of the book also includes authentic letters written by Martin's prototype to the author (the real-life Antonia), which have been edited for aesthetic and creative purposes, as well as built-in fragments of books and songs that had cult status at the time of the narrative and set many of the aesthetic models for young people at the beginning of the '90s. By contrast, the usual political, economic, and other clichés about this period have been intentionally omitted, in order to create a narrative that goes beyond the specific time frame and appeals to readers of any age and any period.

The novel pays an intimate homage to another of its main characters—the city of Burgas of the '70s, '80s, and '90s, with its streets, poets and writers, actors and famous personalities, which have been included in the book with their real names.

The second part of the book, which is narrated by Antonia, is constructed on the basis of letters that she wrote to Martin during the summer of 1994. They include stories about her family and they lead the reader through some of the same places around the city, but during earlier decades. The narrative reveals an alternative emotional world of a family environment, where love, real care, sensitivity, and even weakness come together to create the kind of protective fortress that Martin has been denied. This also becomes the reason why, thanks to this embryonic love, Antonia turns into his catharsis.

Antonia's part of the book in its own way closes the circle that has been opened by her birth and then reaches the same fateful point of their meeting, with which Martin's narrative begins. At this stage, we're already aware of the circle's dénouement—the inevitable end and death (regardless of whether as a metaphor or a literal one). It is precisely death that serves as an organizing thread, which serves to frame the narrative. Its presence in the lives of Martin and Antonia is particular, but also very different in the meanings it holds for each of them.

This is "a novel about the coming of age" of a generation, which so far has had no distinct representation in Bulgarian literature and culture, as the book's editor Marin Bodakov writes, then continues: "This is a very painful and—for that very reason—honest account, which constructs both a cartography of memory and an archeology

of the absence of these young men and women from the big picture of contemporary Bulgaria. And the absence of love. It wouldn't be a lie if I said that I often see on the faces of those protesting in Sofia and elsewhere some features of the characters of this novel—characters that are tender and immature, confused and as if still in the process of growing up. Characters that are highly cultured, but also awkward and inappropriate. Characters who are becoming unnecessary to our world—and to their own selves.

That's the spirit of the generation that comes after my own. But while the other novels that deal with this period rely on the crutches of the grotesque or even the cynical, which can help take us further from the unbearable truth, in this novel I see that Antonia, with her typical psychologism, doesn't care about spectacles, regardless of how dramatic her 'love story' might be. She examines everything closely. She doesn't analyze, she recounts."

Novel, 396 pages

ISBN: 9786191866434

Janet-45 Publishing House, 2021

## EXCERPT

*Translated by Ekaterina Petrova*

### 1.

I've always wanted to see my own death on the faces of my family. To see their absent expressions slowly fill with the realization of my absence and reveal the unit of measurement of the punishment: their love for me, which has come to its senses too late. Many times I childishly longed for those moments of a perfectly aimed swing, of that particular luster that the eyes acquire after a well-deserved slap. It wasn't the rage of the strike against my family that I was after, but simply their stupor—the loss for words, the going out of their minds—as soon as they would realize that, like so many other things, they also missed my demise. Preferably, through their own fault. At such moments, I imagined standing on death's highest step, from where I'd watch them, wretched and stunned—Dad, Mom, and even the Little Guy—scrambling to get to me. Panting over their meager concern for yours truly. Over the trifling attention divided between me and them. Over the condescension, predetermined by a few genes' resemblance between us. I longed for that moment of distilled grief for their perished supposed child—simple pain for their own offspring, whose near existence they have forgotten about.

That's what I hoped for in my fantasies. Death, I used to think, was the absolute sclerosis for those who no longer possessed a heartbeat. But for a brief time—even for the living. Not because of the oblivion, but because of the other, much more important symptom that sclerosis could cause them to develop: the ability to remember even the most long-ago event as something that was happening right now. Something substantial and lasting, in which they once again exist. That's exactly what I hoped for. And then I would have observed the memories rush in—as through the floodgates had been opened—and engulf my crawling family: of my easy birth, of my fussiness and difficulty in falling asleep, of my cranky little face, before and after the thick glasses, of my childish obstinacy and the stubborn teenage loneliness scattered all over the world map above my bed. And finally—of my sixteen-year-old love: the vague face of a girl—your face—which hadn't appeared yet, and so would remain unknown to them.

One of my favorite books used to be *Death Is a Lonely Business*. I fell in love with its title straight away, and afterward—as I devoured it—with the droplets of fog enveloping everything from that superfluous world that the book talked about. I was entranced by the rotten scent of the puddles, which the Grim Reaper—the ridiculous stinky old man from the novel—left behind on the pages, as he and the main character competed for the lives of all these lonely and decaying souls, each abandoned in its own corner. I believed one of these corners was mine, but no longer knew if I wanted someone to come for me, too. The other book I discovered a little later was *Solaris*. It was as though all the humidity from Bradbury's derelict Venice piers had flowed, all at once, into Lem's sentient plasma ocean, which ruled over memory. But the last paragraph was most dear to me, especially its final sentence: "I knew nothing, and I persisted in the faith that the time of cruel miracles was not past."<sup>1</sup>

Even at the age when I met you, I still had the habit of fantasizing about presumptuous ways to die: by jumping into an abyss full of hungry crocodiles, by being crucified next to a tree hollow full of wasps, by the dull and rusty edge of a guillotine. By that time, they'd already turned into nothing but gloomy entertainment—a game devoid of any real intention to punish Mom, Dad, or even the Little Guy. Before you, the only thing that hadn't occurred to me was the complete and final dissolution into nothingness. The absoluteness of the real end/eden. Simply boiling my shoe and sitting down to eat it because of you. And then, as you watch me in amusement, clicking your tongue, which counts down our remaining time on earth—suddenly, I'm gone. We're both gone at the same time: without understanding anything, without any awareness of entropy, without the brief oblivion of the false world.

<sup>1</sup> The quotation used here is taken from the 1970 English-language edition of the book, translated from the French by Joanna Kilmartin and Steve Cox.

Without anything remaining of us.

The truth is that I could only imagine your face grieving for me and reflecting my death. For instance, I imagined the following: you cautiously inhale the flame, as if—the way you're supposed to—you are simply breathing. Then you lower your eyelids and sit there for a few moments, indifferent, with not even a speck of mercy in your chest. You even smirk with that all-seeing sarcasm of yours, which bites your lips and makes you frighteningly mature. Not again, you think, as though this kind of betrayal has happened before, and you suddenly feel overtaken by sleep. But you don't fall asleep. You curl up in your bed and remain there, motionless. One hour, then another, until the torrential evening muddies the air in the room with its dirty feet. Your fear of my ghost is greater than your strength to love me. I understand that, I get it, and I feel guilt toward you, and furious compassion for you, because I've probably inadvertently caused my own death, which for the first time causes anyone any real pain.

I also imagine you—as you absurdly wait for me to appear, to invisibly stir the atoms—keeping watch over the few meters of air between the window and the door. The drop in your eye is a magnifying glass. With the blankets pulled over your head, your whole body is burning up against the icy draft from my, now empty, place in the world. A feverish little flame, which tries to deny it, while your fingers clutch the edge of the bed sheet that keeps death at bay. All that death, under which you're still amazingly alive.

It's probably at this moment, as you lie curled up below the cutouts from rock magazines on the wall (all those made-up skulls that only chatter about death), I'll have to pull the covers and slide my icy palm over your back, make a cracking sound in the corner behind the chest of drawers, or blink in the darkness. Like one of those white dwarf stars whose hearts burst in order to announce their death, rather than their birth. I once described a similar state to you: something resembling palpitations, rapid breathing, tightness in the chest—the feeling of an impending end. And yet, even in the total absence of time, I would have probably hoped that something could still be annulled, that it could be fixed. I imagined how you, almost turned on by grief, put your arms around my head, which has been inadvertently smashed into some sharp corner, or on the contrary—hear this!—it has sacrificed itself to snatch you away from a predatory wave. Then you start slamming it into the mattress, into the imprint of your head on the pillow, into the memory of me, which is carved into the down filling. How could you, how could you, how could you, you say over and over again, as you leave kiss marks on my glasses, which have survived against all laws of physics.

But even in that moment of extreme intimacy, as filtered by my imagination—a death dedicated to you—something would reach your ears: the rattle of plates in the kitchen sink, the dragging of slippers on the floor, the sneezing flush of the toilet, the clicking

locks of the doors beyond your room. All those sounds through which life continues to exist, to insist on its existence. It's precisely them—those minor, invariable sounds—that would eventually tear me away from you. And then I'd have nothing left but to wish for the nothingness in which I wouldn't hear anything and I'd remember nothing at all. In which I wouldn't see even the faces of my grief-stricken parents.

## 2.

I wrote to you many times afterward: I feel I'm suffocating. You thought that was a beautiful expression intended to scare you with the cosmic scale of my love, didn't you? But I felt it physically, with my Adam's apple, with the lungs in my slack chest, which had never seen the tiny snake of cigarette smoke crawling around them. Neither Mom nor Dad smoked, and I have no idea how they managed to endure themselves without the help of the little smoke crutches that now support me through memory's wanderings. I only ever saw Mom with a cigarette once, I don't even know where she got it from. She singed its end and sucked on it like a comet, while peeking out of the glassed-in balcony—until the front door of our building slammed behind Dad. I'd never seen a cigarette disappear so quickly, as Mom, probably afraid she'd burn her fingers, stuck the cigarette butt under the running faucet. The entire cloud of smoke, which she had swallowed in one gulp, disappeared without a trace inside her mouth—and she didn't even cough.

And here I am now, lighting a cigarette, so as to use its ephemeral little whip to spur on my memory—as if it needed any coercing. Can memory be coerced and does it get altered if we exercise violence on it? Does it bear false witness—just to get out of it? To save itself. But I don't want salvation. It seems to me that the sclerotic clarity that seizes those who are alive and those who are in love will never leave me.

Back then, seven minutes after Milen and Lyuba hastily introduced us to each other in the Adriana Budevskia Theater foyer, and the matted bodies from your high school shoved us toward the auditorium—that was the first time I felt something that resembled breathing rarified air. It was as though I'd ended up on top of one of the peaks on the raised-relief map over my bed. The peaks were smooth and had the color of ice cream, which I used to really enjoy as a child. I'd explained to you what happens at a high altitude, do you remember: hypoxia. The syndrome of high altitudes, the alpine ridge in the zone of death, where the oxygen leaves your lungs on its own. It seems like I'd just discovered a new way to die: going up to an altitude where you're no longer able to breathe.

And there you were, suddenly sitting in front of me. I saw the back of your head, the fuzz-covered nape, the side view of the frames of your glasses, shaped like thin little moons, which glistened in the velvety light. You'd braided your hair in two

loose braids—seven years earlier, this would've meant, “pull at them,” a few years from then it'd be a sign of immaturity. The rows shook and creaked as the last of the people settled into their seats, unintentionally moving me a few millimeters closer to your head. I remember there was no scent coming from you at that moment—just the rarified air of another being. As though you weren't there. Next to Milen's Rexona deodorant and the flowery perfume of Milena, his girlfriend and your friend from the English Language School, you were the absence of oxygen.

I leaned back and closed my eyes toward the three of you. You were sitting in the seats in front of me, while my seat happened to be on its own, in the row right behind. In the coolness of the auditorium, my eyes began to sting and my skin started crawling with pharaoh ants, which happened whenever I came to a halt after walking quickly in the heat. I'd almost run to the theater—with my ripped sneaker and all. Later Marti, Milen had said and just waved at me, before installing himself between you and Luyba. And that was it, that was his excuse for why I had to sit on my own—but chivalry was calling his name. And then he turned toward the light, because he loved the spotlight: in his blue shirt with embroidered little swords on it and his pants which fit perfectly, with his wavy bangs that looked like they'd been blown back by a whirlwind, which he had only now discreetly gotten out of the way, so that you and Lyuba could make it to the theater on time. Well, it wasn't for nothing we'd be watching *Hair*, after all, I thought spitefully. Just a few days before the performance, which was being put on by the English Language School's tenth grade class, Lyuba—who was supposed to perform in it as well—had twisted her ankle. I imagined that Milen had basically carried her to the theater in his arms, rather than letting her limp over and exert her ballerina's muscles. They'd come to make sure that Luyba's substitute was flat chested or elephantine. And anyway, since when did tickets for student plays have assigned seating?! But it was Milen who'd acquired them—Milen, who in general loved acquiring things whose value, to be honest, was often highly questionable. He and I were probably the only people in the whole auditorium from our school—the High School for the Study of Foreign Languages. Its long name compensated for the lack of any sort of prestige.

Then the curtain started to come up. It was probably the second time in my life that I found myself inside a theater, the first time inside the Adriana Budevskaja one for sure, which was now filled with a hippy ambiance, bell bottoms, and raspy voices that finally quieted down as the lights dimmed. Even then it seemed to me that none of it suited that haughty and cool place, where there seemed to be nothing real. By the way, Dad was the only one who'd taken me to the puppet theater on Bogoridi back in the day. Back then the street was still called Lenin, and I was even

littler than the Little Guy, who at the time was not a part of my plans. I remember vehemently refusing to sit in Dad's lap in order to see better. I found an opening between the shoulders which stood like guards, and used it as an embrasure though which I watched the wooden girl lighting one match after another, right under her strings (“She's going to burn down, isn't she, because she's made of wood,” Dad said I'd kept asking him.) Or, with a nascent, already unhealthy excitement, I'd wait for the clumsy wolf to blow down the little pigs' houses, as their eyes grew enormous with astonishment. I could still see them from my seat, despite my newly diagnosed shortsightedness. It was those piggies' silliness that gave rise to one of my first ideas of ways to die: death by blowing away.

Do you remember how in the now quiet auditorium, someone started clapping prematurely, but quickly realized their mistake and suffocated the impatient bird of the palms of their hands? But others followed suit, too, and like a startled flock, they rose and blocked out the last bit of lights over our heads. The stage slowly appeared in the lightning-fast darkness, the set seemed to come alive, someone stepped into the spotlight's shadow. And then, just like those poor audience members that get forced onto the stage against their will, so as to sing along with the stars, I started to realize what I looked like: the dirty pink drop-crotch pants, faded and bulging at the knees, the tucked-in t-shirt and shirt, both soaked in other people's cigarette smoke, the hair twisted in an elastic band, the stooping posture. As if they didn't belong to me, I saw my own wiry, lanky, slack arms, which instead of ripping things out like a real man, kept crumpling the ticket inside my pocket. Is that the sight you'd just been introduced to?

And then I suddenly felt the urge to make some grand gesture for your sake. To go out into the evening's panting heat and steal the side mirror of some car, for instance. Just like that—I'd go out there, all sullen, indiscriminately evil, and armed with a recklessness magnified by my thick eyeglasses, and I'd brazenly rip out the side mirror of some polished Wartburg. Struck by this idea, and the desire to carry it out, I got up and started making my way out of the row of seats. I still remember: I could see the back of your head, its shadowy lair as the light shone from the front, your rounded, apple-like shoulder, which leaned in the opposite direction from Milen and Luyba. Your silhouette was part of the set, a transient piece of paper cut by the hand of a little girl, with a golden fuzzy band circling its thin edges. I could still lean over and blow at you—maybe you would rustle, thus giving away the illusion that you were real. But nobody turned around, nobody hissed at me to duck down, I wasn't blocking anyone's view, and maybe I wasn't real myself. Milen's sphinx, with his palm over Lyuba's thigh, didn't even sense me behind his back. Sitting upright, he gazed forward—somehow too unnaturally forward, the way one gazes over the



desert. For a moment, I remembered the curse of the pharaohs—anyone who dared to disturb the pharaoh's peace would be slayed by the wings of death. And there you were, remaining on the other side of the air that I'd just disturbed in this dark place, as dark as the inside of a sepulcher. You, who were the reason I was going out.

At that moment, some girl's sharp knees dug into my shin. I tried to slip away, while she shushed at me vindictively, and then—almost repulsed by my harmlessness—pulled out her skirt, which had tangled around my leg. She used her hand to push against my hip and shoved me out of the way. That convinced me I existed.

I finally made my way out, then turned the corner around the peeling majesty of the Courthouse, with its shabby little park full of tipsy tramps, walked down Shishman Street toward the Old Post Office, and took Milin Kamak to the Main Street. I preferred to take the knotwork of little streets, which I connected in constellations only known to me, and used the most complicated ways to get where I was going, instead of taking the bigger streets. The little streets' shapeless coziness, their curbs, agitated by old roots, their rushed ends, which touched like a little tongue the maw of the large boulevards—all that unsightliness, which resembled my own, was much more pleasant to me. Yards with benches that still had galoshes underneath them, with oars and shovels left leaning against the fruit trees, with piled-up junk filling the corners—and without any premonition in any of it of the sea that lay beyond.

It was that time of evening when people start to appear purple, like urban chameleons, when the street lights languidly fill with something resembling light, which extinguishes the remains of the day, and when the shadows rise and set the streets free. Concealed by the featureless twilight, I walked with the piece of evidence already in my hands—just before crossing Boteva Street, on a shy little street, I'd discovered the green Wartburg. The only thing missing was the tongue-clicking witnesses, which I would've wanted to perturb. Easily, without the need to exert any pressure—or at least it seems so now, after all these years—my hand ripped off the car's listless right-side mirror. It only made a crunching sound, like when you walk in freshly fallen snow.

I'll admit this to you: for a moment, I hesitated about going home—it was untypically hot for June, my clothes were sticking to my back, I looked terrible, which was something usual that I was only realizing for the first time now and somehow outside myself. With that same newly awake part of my brain, I also realized that I had already begun to wait. After flowing down Alexandrovska Street, my steps had followed that inevitable route, which after the end of the performance was surely going to lead you to The Terrace as well. Fifteen past eight: that's what time it was, according to the clock next to Bulgaria Hotel.



## DULEVA, Demetra

**Demetra Duleva** graduated Italian Philology and English at Sofia University. She specialised in comparative linguistics in Rome. For years she has been working as a freelance translator—translating books, films, and TV series from Italian, English, French, and Russian. In 2003 she joined the staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and served at the Bulgarian Embassy in Paris until autumn 2020. She currently lives and works in Sofia.

Since her student years Demetra has been recording various observations and thoughts. However, the first touches of a novel appeared when she went to live in Brussels, more than a decade ago. But life and her career took over and the idea was abandoned—until four years ago, when she collected the scattered fragments and began to write. Night after night, page after page, until a novel took shape. With the goal being not its completion, but the writing itself.

The result was her debut book, *The Wandering Albatross*, which won the 2020 Pen Prize for Best First Novel. It was awarded second prize in the fiction category of the Culture Portal and was nominated for Novel of the Year by the 13 Centuries Bulgaria Fund.

# INVERTED CONSTELLATIONS

## Summary



*Inverted Constellations* is Demetra Duleva's second novel, after *The Wandering Albatross*, which was warmly received by readers and literary critics.

And I hasten to share—the novel happened. As an unexpected love, as an insidious illness, as a painful betrayal by a close friend, as an escape from childhood, as a shaking off the nightmarish dream of a schizophrenic communist past. For Yoana to be able to escape herself, to return, to save herself, to continue to love. And to be loved.

The novel begins on the day the protagonist, Yoana, has her birthday—she turns 44 in her Parisian home. Her mother calls from Bulgaria to wish her a

happy birthday. And to tell her that Naiden, her great love, has died of a heart attack.

Yoana is a respected neonatologist at the Necker Hospital. She is happily married to Andre, they have twins—a boy and a girl who are now students. The news of Naiden's death brings her back to the past.

To that other Yoana, who has not yet recovered from her parents' divorce, and has to settle in the dormitory of the language school in Plovdiv—her hometown. On the fifth floor, in the last room 115. With two other unknown girls—Gergana and Dora. And with a battered suitcase that held her few belongings and her immense sadness. The years are: when the Chernobyl accident happened in the USSR, but few know; when Gorbachev began perestroika and millions trembled in hope, but the communists continued to lead Bulgaria.

The novel may be reminiscent of Vlado Davarov's *Yesterday*, but it is very different.

*Inverted Constellations* is a novel mostly about love. And about hate. And about loneliness amidst the crowd. And about the spiritual poverty of that time. And the delusion of being among equals. And about the dreams hidden in the darkest corners of the soul. A novel about pain. Of speechlessness and wordlessness.

Yoana does not dare to defy the system, because that's what everyone does. And she doesn't want to. Just like she doesn't want to see her mother and father betray her. And leave her to struggle. Alone. To painfully transform herself from a child into a woman. To painfully explore the world around her, to explore her body, her feelings.

A chance meeting with Naiden turns everything upside down. Forever. Yoana is sure that this is love. And she clings to it without thinking what it will cost her, without caring that Naiden has other relationships. She's sixteen and he's twenty-four. She's a schoolgirl and he's a student. Her parents are divorced and his are from the party oligarchy.

For Yoana, love is salvation. For Naiden, who is headed for a political career, love is power. The women in his life—his marriages and divorces—later prove this. Yoana knows of his infidelities, but she does not blame him, but herself. What is important to her is that he returns to her.

Somehow the five years at the language school pass imperceptibly. Yoana loses not only her innocence but also Gergana, her closest friend, who dies of cancer. Yoana is determined to fight. To break up with Naiden, to study medicine, to forgive her mother, to try to vindicate her father who is a doctor in Algeria.

The Berlin Wall falls, the communists fall in Bulgaria, everything is different now. Young people go abroad to seek a better life. Yoana listens to her father's advice and graduates in medicine in Paris. Naiden climbs up the political ladder and to the top of the business world. New marriages and new millions follow. Until the heart attack.

The novel's narrative proceeds on two planes—the present (Paris and Madagascar, Yoana goes on a three-month business trip to the hospital in Antananarivo) and the past—the memories of her school years in Bulgaria. The past is given precedence, but it doesn't irritate. The episodes from Africa are interesting and curious, especially the story of Dr Mateo, and the attitude of the locals towards life and death.

There is a third narrative layer—documentary, let's call it. The texts, though brief at times, are relegated to a separate page. These are: the contents of the red satin box; the daily routine at the boarding school; a list of films; poems; recipes; fables; newspaper cuttings; pages from an old lexicon... They seem to complete the whole picture of Yoana's life, the innermost part that no one has touched.

*Inverted Constellations* is a novel that readers will remember. For Yoana and her love. For her quest to be free. For her pain and the strength to forgive.

Novel, 288 pages

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Hermes Publishing House, 2021

## EXCERPT

*Translated by Gergana Galabova*

Us girls... we were and weren't on the same team. If you could blend in, if you could keep up with everyone, they recognised you as part of the group. But if you were somehow different, if they sensed that you were keeping a secret, they would immediately tell on you and let you go down like a wrecked boat.

We were three to a room, but most of us hung out in pairs, since each needed her second I to survive more easily. Binomials, who went everywhere together, shared one opinion, and acted as one. As if having a faithful soldier made you a general and gave you the strength of an entire army.

"Are you going to Assia's birthday?"

"We haven't decided yet," answered Radka-Denitsa.

"Did you read Gorky's Mother?"

Elena-Nelly would tell you: "Yes, but it's boring!"

Rosi-Vera always whispered to each other, but never shared their opinion. My binom Yoana-Gergana was a bit odd, it often broke down, as Gergana would be on sick leave, and I would be very bored at the boarding school. But even alone, I was still Yoana-Gergana.

Gergana was away again, she had another serious asthma attack. She doesn't go to PE, because of the dust in the gym, I don't know if she has an allergy, but as soon as she walks in, she starts coughing. Last time I thought she was going to suffocate. I haven't seen her all week. Who knows when she'll be back?

When Gergana was gone I snuck out at night more often. The only thing that kept me going was the magical world by the shores of the Maritsa River. I felt at home, lying between the branches of the willow. Wild rabbits gathered on the meadow below and in the moonlight, they looked like silvery-white fluffs. They shifted their ears and moved silently like waves. The city gradually fell asleep. An ambulance shrieked; a motor hummed. Then all human sounds subsided. I was left with the sounds of the river and the forest. They never stopped, as if the planet was telling me its mysterious origin.

The leaves' shivers, the smell of damp wood, the cool darkness and the silver rabbits muffled my anxieties. The world erased its borders, everything unpleasant melted away, turning into elusive shadows.

I daydreamed about Naiden and gathered courage to go see him again. I hadn't been to the flea market in months. I hadn't had the guts to go since he spoke to me, and I humiliated myself like a schoolgirl. My lovesickness was overpowered by the embarrassment I felt when I thought of him. I couldn't overcome the shame

of our first conversation. Just two lines, but they were enough to mess me up. "Little girl," he'd said—how dare he?

In time, however, I started to talk myself up. I would encourage myself: "Why are you overthinking this, he probably doesn't remember you, or didn't even notice you". There was something else which boosted my self-esteem and made me believe that I could grab his attention. I was aware that over spring my body had filled out. A few weeks ago, my aunt and I visited Simo and when he saw me, he whistled. The soldiers, who were stuck to the fence, couldn't take their eyes off me.

"Simo, Simo, won't you introduce us to your sister?"

"She's my cousin! Now scram, you little slackers." Simo waved his hand, as if to shoo away flies, and took me aside.

And then Aunt Mila spread newspapers on the wooden table, took out boxes of meatballs and pastries, and Simo ate like a horse. Auntie looked at us and smiled.

Dad's letters kept getting longer, coaching me, and I sensed that he was worried. With the money I got from him every month I bought a sweater—red, with black trim and a high collar. And red patent leather shoes with thick rubber soles.

One Wednesday I gathered my courage again, put on the new sweater, put on my "Rila" jeans, and thus dressed, left the dorm. I headed straight for the railway bridge over the Maritsa.

Usually, I looked around and listened for a long time before crossing the bridge, but this time my impatience to see Naiden blunted my vigilance. Besides, I felt so beautiful, so omnipotent, that I was basically flying. At times like that, it never crosses your mind that something bad could happen to you. I walked down the tracks with all the carelessness of a high school girl.

And the train caught up to me!

I felt it first in my heels like a pin prick running along the track. Then like a breeze, a distant dragon breathing down my neck. Finally, I heard it. I turned and saw it looming in the distance, like a small black dot that quickly enlarged and became a monster. I ran with all my might, thinking I would be able to outrun it. But it was as if I was in a dream, I was supposedly running very fast, but I felt that I was standing still.

The locomotive whistled, the sound went through me like a wire, shocking me. I barely managed to press myself tightly against the metal railing and cover my head with the high collar of my sweater. I was in mortal terror that my hair might scatter in the wind, get caught on something, and the train would drag me down the tracks. My body could feel the rhythm of the carriages, the mass of air they pushed out hitting me with the force of a hammer and burning my skin. Boom boom boom... one, two, three... sixteen.

Then silence!

Through the metal railings I saw two white butterflies chasing each other. They almost touched my nose, and then flew away over the marsh along the banks. I thought that even if I had perished, they would still be fluttering carelessly over the river. What did nature care? But I had survived and felt stronger than fate.

Gradually, the world around me was coming back. I could hear the whispers of the dragonflies over the Maritsa. I peeled myself off the railings, my ribs aching from being pressed against the metal bars. With uncertain steps I crossed the last meters of the bridge. Feeling faint, I sat on a bench between the apartment blocks to collect my thoughts. I remember that as I rested under the tall poplars, all my senses had sharpened to the extreme. I took the passing train as an omen, a sign of something new and big invading my life to sweep everything away and change me forever.

I took off the sweater, tied it around my waist. My t-shirt nicely outlined my full breasts. I wasn't wearing a bra, and my nipples poked out under the thin fabric. On other days this would have bothered me, but not today! I head to the flea market feeling untouchable. In high spirits and high adrenaline, I march determinedly towards Naiden. He spots me from a distance, and I immediately realise that this time I have grabbed his attention. I stop in front of him, look him straight in the eye and confidently ask: "Do you have a Serge Gainsbourg mixtape?"

"Who?"

"Brigitte Bardot's boyfriend, haven't you heard?"

"I've heard everything. You'll have it by next Saturday. I can bring it to you personally."

"When?"

"What about tomorrow night?"

"Okay, but you'll have to come to the dorm."

I've always been quick-witted, able to think of a comeback. Same happened with Naiden. He would ask me questions and without thinking, I would answer. He smiled a few times. We agreed to meet at the river the next day at seven. I figured I could go out for a bit after dinner. I left and heard him calling: "What's your name?"

"Yoana."

"I'm Naiden."

I nodded (as if I didn't know) and went on. I feigned indifference, but my happiness was immeasurable.

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Lately, I haven't been able to focus. I've been tossing and turning. It's Naiden's fault, by the way. I couldn't ignore the disappointment I felt when he hadn't come to our meeting by the river. And I had an awful lot of studying to do. I had no idea how I was going to pass. I had a verbal exam in literature class today. I wasn't expecting it and I wasn't well prepared. I had two As and two Bs and thought my grade could be averaged, but she was like: "You're between an A and B, come up to the desk"

Thankfully, I got lucky. She didn't give me an F, that would be dreadful at the end of the year. But now I had an essay due on Friday.

On top of everything, they gave us back the maths test and I barely got a C. Comrade Grigorov gave back the papers with the words: "You haven't solved your equations, Yoana! Too many unknowns, I reckon."

I have prepared a saline solution to spray into Gergana's nostrils with a syringe. I stole it from the doctor's office especially for her. She was ill again; I've never seen another person get ill so often from the smallest thing. And she's been lying down for ten days. I urged her to apply a compress, but she shook her head and sank deeper into the pillow. She was my first patient. I constantly monitored her and prescribed treatments: feet in warm water, back rubs with alcohol, chamomile tea with honey. Now I suggested she slept with socks on and an extra T-shirt under her pyjamas. It's a bit chilly.

I slipped into bed next to her, she immediately fell asleep—an innocent sleep, and I thought of Naiden. I wanted to share my secret with her so badly, but I couldn't. Since I've fallen in love, I've felt a little guilty when it comes to her. I felt the balance between us was off. She shared everything with me, and I met her honesty with deception. It weighed on me that I didn't talk to her about the most important thing in my life, and I didn't know why. There was just something stopping me. I almost didn't want to share, but I also couldn't. Two or three times I'd been on the verge of telling her—and I couldn't find the words, my voice just disappeared. My secret was so big it was deadly. As if saying it out loud would turn the words into blades and pierce my throat. And as time passed, it become increasingly harder to tell her. I held her in my arms, her even breathing soothing me, and I drifted off.

Surprisingly, Naiden showed up a few days later, unannounced. With Serge Ginsburg's mixtape and two tickets for *Return of the Jedi*. At that time, cultural events were so rare that their occurrence caused a real stir. Everyone talked about them, and it was crucial to get your hands on a ticket or a book. The movies from Soviet Friday on TV were readily available and followed by everyone, and Russian

actors Nikita Mikhalkov and Lyudmila Gurchenko were as famous as the American stars. You could buy luxurious editions of translated literature only if you knew the right people, and tickets to Western films were sold on the black market. People queued for hours to get tickets for an event like *Return of the Jedi*.

Naiden had waited at the bus stop for the end of the school day and when the doors opened, he walked into the courtyard and found me. I didn't want to be seen with him. I instinctively felt that if they suspected anything I'd be in big trouble. I wasn't quite sure how to sneak out of campus in broad daylight, much less how to be late for the evening inspection, but I was ready for anything, and this was a new feeling for me. I was surprised by my feelings, overwhelmed by their power. I went to the teacher and started lying, asking her in a honeyed voice for permission to skip class, so I could see my mother. Divorce, new family, baby... I squeezed out a couple of tears. She gave me permission; it was a few days before the end of the year, and the rules were a bit more relaxed. I didn't even have lunch. I walked across the room to change and promptly snuck out. Naiden was waiting for me further down the street, in front of the entrance to the Sugar Factory, as we had agreed. As soon as he saw me, he walked towards me. He pointed to a motorbike parked nearby.

"Have you ridden a motorbike before?"

"No, I haven't!"

"Hold on tight and make sure you don't move too much, or we'll fall off."

I was over the moon, I honestly couldn't believe I was about to ride his gorgeous bike—polished, powerful, black. I sat behind him and hugged him. I felt the strength of his muscles. Naiden flexed his torso, grabbed the handlebars, and with a jerk of his foot, started the engine. The sound of the motor resonated in my chest and merged with the pounding of my heart. I inhaled the scent of his leather jacket, and we took flight—away from the school, passing crowded buses, horse-drawn carts, and clanking Trabants.

Before the cinema, we went to Puldin to eat tripe in butter. It was the first time anyone had taken me to a restaurant. Naiden confidently ordered for both of us. Offal was quite popular in those years: fried liver, gizzards with onions, tripe with chilli and garlic, jelly veal tongue. And when you get by mostly on bread and pepper spread, food like that is delectable!

In the movie theatre, I was so completely engrossed in the film that I didn't realise when he'd slipped his hand up my skirt. He was holding my knee and stroking the inside of my thigh with his fingers. Slowly he moved his hand up and his grip grew tighter. The cheeky gesture made me feel uncomfortable, especially since it was in public. I pushed him away angrily. He sat back in his chair with an unruffled smile that made me feel small.

A toy in his hands.

I had no idea how to flirt. I was confused!

I looked at his thick black hair, eyes sparkling like coals, broad shoulders accentuated by the black leather jacket, and I didn't know what to do.

There was something Mephistophelian about him that kept taking over, some dark side that pulled at me like the edge of an abyss. I was falling into its impenetrable shadows, and I realized that I was completely enchanted.

After the cinema, Naiden dropped me off at the dorm. He acted like nothing had happened. It was already dark, but I had some time before my curfew, and I was in no hurry to get back. They weren't likely to let me stay that late any other time. I suggested he stay a little longer.

We sat down on the riverbank, and he immediately hugged me. It felt good to feel his heavy hand on me. I felt a sense of belonging in his arms. We stayed like that, silent, the slow water glimmering in the darkness. Suddenly I was afraid that nothing would follow, that in a moment he would get up and leave, and that would be the end.

And just then, Naiden turned his face to me and kissed me, barely touching my lips. It was like a question of whether to continue. I didn't move away, nor did I respond to the kiss. I had no idea what to do. He eased me onto the grass. Leaned over me and began kissing me insistently, with a pressure that brooked no refusal or objection. I slammed my teeth into his and he laughed. He showed me how much to open my mouth and continued. He pushed his tongue into my mouth. Then he sucked on mine. I was enjoying everything he was doing. The musky smell and salty taste made me dizzy and intoxicated. I felt myself losing control.

He shoved his hands under my t-shirt and wrapped his palms around my breasts, squeezing them like tennis balls. Then harder, until I was moaning in pain. His fingers left red marks on my skin. He took my nipples between his fingers and gently rolled them. He brought his hand down and lifted my skirt. His breathing quickened. He unzipped his trousers. With body pressure he tried to spread my legs. I shouted "No!"

He pulled back in surprise. I jumped up and slipped under the fence like a cat. I was shaking all over. I felt disappointment—in myself and in him—mixed with excitement and intense longing. Because I wanted to do it. But not like this! I wanted my first time to leave me with a good memory, to be in clean sheets, a comfortable bed, and to last all night, not like the rabbits for a few minutes in the bushes. Besides, I wanted to have a hold on him, so he would wait for me here in September and we could make love dozens, hundreds of times.

I walked into the dorm, called the man on duty to tell him I was home. But after lights out, when everyone was asleep, I couldn't sleep a wink. I got up and sneaked out. I went to the willow tree and spent hours daydreaming.

Everything with Naiden had happened quickly, almost roughly, but the memory, even with the hindsight of a few hours, enlarged time and space to infinity. Like a black hole swallowing the universe, I returned to each moment and dwelled in it until I had exhausted every drop of blissful energy the experience offered. Every minute spent with Naiden was hyperbolized to the point of becoming a perfect sphere, just as water droplets in American chateaus form into a vacuum and, freed from gravity, float weightlessly as perfect forms of happiness.

The star-studded night sky gave me courage. It suggested that in the game of dominoes, which I thought I was constantly playing with only the two zeros—the black tile of continuous darkness—I had more options. Because when you wait a bit, you'll see that in the complete darkness the white appears without fail, concentrating everything into a bright circle of positive emotion, serene memory, human kindness, a caress, or light. Hope...

And then you understand that the past and the present are not pure darkness, but a night sprayed with billions of white dots—an infinite domino to play with and plan your future moves.

The stars have never been so close and so bright ever again.

And so many that it felt like being in a glass ball with falling snowflakes.

*Sheet from a notebook with a verse from a Serge Ginsburg song*

*La vie ne vaut d'être vécu  
sans amour,  
mais c'est vous qui l'avez voulu,  
mon amour.  
Ne vous déplaie  
en dansant la javanaise,  
nous nous aimions  
le temps d'une chanson.*

*(Life is worthless  
without love,  
but you asked for this,  
my love.  
You enjoyed  
dancing  
and being in love  
during this song)*



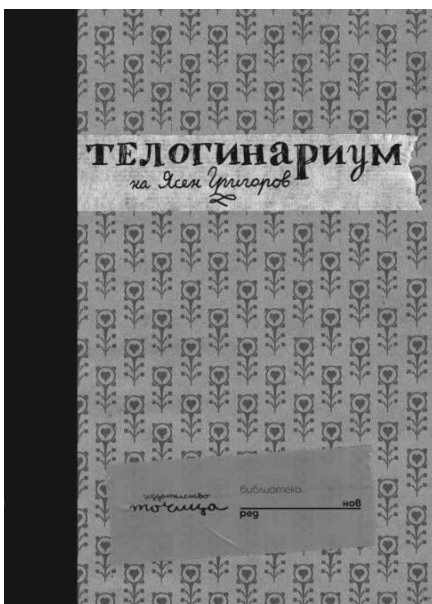
## GRIGOROV, Yassen

Yassen Grigorov is a long-time author and illustrator at the Swiss publishing house Joie de Lire (*Les nuages, Un courant d'air dans la bouche, Les Anges Gardiens, Le Cafard, etc.*). He has won the Opera Prima Award in Bologna. Grigorov's work, *Guardian Angels*, has been published in Colombian and Mexican textbooks. He has also directed a number of films (*Small-Big, Lily the Fish, etc.*) In Bulgaria he works with the Tochitza Publishing House, where he illustrated the collection of English poems *How Many Strawberries Grow on the Sea?* translated by Professor Alexander Shurbanov, and in 2015 he published his own book *Guardian Angels*.

*Bodyginarium* is Grigorov's first book aimed entirely at an adult audience. In 2021 his book *If I Were a Color* was published by Tochitza Publishing.

# BODYGINARIUM

Summary



Short story collection, 40 pages

ISBN: 9786197172263

Tochitza Publishing House, 2020

What would happen if we followed our every impulse? What if we put ourselves at the forefront of everything we do? What would happen if we "merged with nature"? If we let go? If we stopped rejoicing, if we dried up?

This book contains fifteen fantastical stories in which states of mind incarnate in the flesh. Most of these stories are slightly scary, much like the tales of an ancient traveler. The human body is a Borgesian labyrinth of possibilities and at the end of each of them lurks a monster. And that monster is you.

Unless the most fantastical of all possibilities happens: unless one person meets another person. And this other person sees them completely.

# EXCERPT

Translated by Dessislava Toncheva

## - Figure 1 -

One man had the ability to grow more and more heads out of different parts of his body. If he pointed at anything, a head with his own consciousness would grow out of his index finger. When he raised his hand to wave at someone, another head would pop out of his armpit to greet them personally. If he scratched his navel, a new head would bite him from there, after suddenly materializing. Heads also grew from his knees, from the nipples on his chest, from the vertebrae of his spine, everywhere. This man was uncontrollably multifaceted and no one liked him as a friend.

## - Figure 2 -

One man stopped eating because he wanted to lose weight. He got used to not eating and his body began to shrink rapidly. His flesh disappeared and a lot of free space started forming between his skin and his skeleton. His bones began to change position, moving freely in the void under his skin. And so, this man would change his shape on a daily basis, becoming a variety of different unheard-of biological species. He was very interesting to scientists specializing in the natural sciences.

## - Figure 3 -

One man figured out exactly what the fact that his flesh is made up of 70% water actually meant. With great effort of consciousness he managed to free himself from the laws of quanta, atoms and all other mighty-tiny forces, and spilled over. He turned into a sea—a small one but big enough to submerge his entire hometown where he lived and drown all his fellow citizens in himself. Only human bones remained floating on the calm surface of this newly formed sea, which to this day reminds us that it is not good to mess with things that our consciousness was not meant for.

## - Figure 4 -

One man had a cavity on the sixth upper left. He didn't have time to go to the dentist because of work. The cavity grew, and he regularly tapped on it with his tongue, checking how big it had become. One day his tongue slowly penetrated into the cavity and dragged his throat, esophagus, lungs, heart and all the other organs along with it. The entire man went down into the cavity hole with his tongue. Inside the hole, he felt especially comfortable. He was glad to realize that he wouldn't have to make an appointment with the dentist because he had self-sealed the cavity.

**- Figure 5 -**

One man really wanted to be fit. He started training, training and training. His muscles grew stronger and more defined. Muscle group after muscle group, his body became a perfect sculptural masterpiece. The man was proud, he was happy, but he began to feel tired. He sat down to rest and felt like a rock. He looked beautiful anatomically, but he couldn't move. Over time, he lost his color, and much later, at least 250 years later, archaeologists discovered him and placed him at the Museum of Classical Art, in the "Realism of the Early Twenty-First Century" section.

**- Figure 6 -**

One man pondered the following philosophical problem for a long time: whether when he closed his eyes, he still existed in the visible world for everyone else. He wondered if he, in fact, turned into pure sensations, or if his physical presence remained a reality. His thoughts were so strongly directed only in this direction that the man really began to disappear for others as soon as he closed his eyes. His blinking turned him into a constantly appearing and disappearing creature.

**- Figure 7 -**

One person felt particularly relaxed. He was so relaxed that his bones softened. He folded into many folds and appeared much like a roll of fabric. This happened to him in the middle of the street. Minutes after he turned, a tailor walked past him. His attention was drawn to the never-before-seen fabric on the sidewalk. The man maintained good personal hygiene, even shaved the hair from his armpits and from his privates. The tailor looked at him and praised him. He took the fabric, and later in his studio he carefully cut it out and sewed an elegant three-piece suit, which he sold at a high price to an extravagant groom. The wedding was wonderful. The divorce was not long in coming, due to the the groom's vanity.

**- Figure 8 -**

One man loved to sit. He always had work to do and he was not able to sit as long as his heart desired. An epidemic of an unknown type of virus broke out in the city where he lived and he had to comply with mandatory quarantine. He remained locked up at his home and was finally happy—he was finally going to sit as much as he wanted. Predictably, he had stocked up on cigarettes, coffee, and interesting books. He settled in comfortably, puffed on his cigarette, sipped from his cup of fresh coffee, and pondered more than he read. He stopped feeling the passage of time. And because the whole material world is made of quanta, his quanta and those of the chair merged very slowly but surely together. The man became a human-like chair or a chair-like man. There is still no consensus on the matter.

**- Figure 9 -**

One man stopped paying attention to his thoughts and they gradually eased. No one had ever made a connection between body weight and that of thoughts before. For this reason, an unprecedented event occurred: the man ascended into space and began to soar. He became more and more disembodied and light until he became a cloud. Some children down on the ground pointed at him and said to their mothers, "Look, mom, that cloud there looks like a man!" Their mothers replied, "Don't talk nonsense! You are the same as your father! Go do your schoolwork!" The man merged with the other clouds. A storm broke out and it started to rain. The man rained down and then he was gone.

**- Figure 10 -**

One man loved to expose his body to the sun because other people admired how well a suntan suited him. The sun was very strong in those days, and the man tanned too much and burned up. There was nothing left of him but a thin stream of smoke that quickly dissipated in the air. Only the shadow of the man withstood the scorching rays of the sun. It continued living an inconspicuous life, not caring if others admired it for anything. The shadow lived long and in good health. It died of old age, calm and happy.

**- Figure 11 -**

One man stopped feeling joy. His face became expressionless, nothing made his soul tremble. The only movements his body made were related to biological needs. People around him started calling him "dry." The man's blood evaporated from his veins, through the pores of his skin, along with his last drops of sweat. His heart emptied like a clay pot. The man withered like a flower forgotten in a vase. When he completely dried out, he crumbled into pieces and disintegrated into fine sand. A wind came out of nowhere and blew away the pile of sand. The wind carried the sand over the Sahara and piled it onto a dune. Right where the new pile of sand had piled up, a camel exhausted from the heat lay down to sleep.

**- Figure 12 -**

A man was once playing with some children in a meadow. At noon, the children went home to have lunch. The man remained alone in the meadow, lying on his back, just as the children had left him at the end of their game. He was no longer very young and he was stiff from the exertion during the game. So, he laid on his back, stiff, with his arms raised, his fingers outstretched, and his legs jutting up. He thought that when the children returned to continue the game, he would ask them to call an adult for help. But the children did not return. Months passed, then years passed, and from the stem of the man's spine, and from his body, arms, and legs, the mighty branches of a beautiful and lush tree bloomed. His eyes ripened like apples.



- Figure 13 -

One person occupied whole spaces. His body filled every cubic centimeter of every room, from the narrow toilet to the wide movie theater in the mall. As soon as he went somewhere, his body quickly swelled up and covered every object with the softness of his flesh, expanding to the smallest corners. Only when he moved did the man not fill up the spaces where he was. He could not live with anyone else. If someone fell asleep next to him, they would suffocate the moment the man fell into the stillness of sleep. One day, as he was expanding, the man's body pushed up against a sharp object and burst. With a farting sound, he flew into a chaotic trajectory and was never seen again.

- Figure 14 -

One person got lost. He knew very well where he was, but he did not know where his body was. He and his body wandered the world separately. The man himself adhered to his daily routine: he got up early, went to work, came home on time, watched the most-watched TV shows and hurried to bed before midnight to get at least eight hours of sleep. The human body on the other hand, performed only its bodily functions and made sure that all its systems worked perfectly. In the morning it did regular workouts, ate well, had sex if it could, took baths, but most importantly, it walked aimlessly forward, always forward. Like the man himself, his body became invisible to others.

- Figure 15 -

One man was waiting for something to happen to him. He stood motionless and waited patiently. When asked, "What are you waiting for?" he would reply: "I'm just waiting." As no conversation could come from that, the man was left alone in the fixed anticipation of something. Gradually he was covered with dust, leaves, and a small mound formed. Years passed and the mound grew to a hill, and finally to a young mountain. Beech forests rose up from its slopes, streams flowed out. Snow fell on top of it, and there it remained because it was high enough. Tourists wondered about the mountain. Hardly any of them knew the secret that if they lay down with one ear to the ground and asked quietly, "What are you waiting for?" they would hear a hoarse answer from the depths of the mountain: "I'm just waiting."

- Epilogue (Fig. 16) -

One man met another man. There were other people around, but the meeting only happened between the two of them. They stood facing each other and looked into each other's eyes. They stood like that for a while, and then they began observing each other. The man who met the other man felt recognized. In the way the other person looked at him, he learned a lot of new things about his hair, his forehead, his nose, his eyes, his neck, his shoulders, his chest, his belly, his navel, his genitals, his thighs, his knees, his calves, his feet, and his toes. He also learned new things about his heart. He remembered old things about his own wholeness. Unwillingly, this man caused the same in the other man he met. The two hugged.



## KARABASHLIEV, Zachary

Zachary Karabashliev is a novelist, playwright and a screenwriter. His debut novel *18% Gray* was published in 2008, became a bestselling title in Bulgaria, and was later published in the United States, France, Poland, Slovakia, Serbia, Croatia, and other countries. It won the prestigious Novel of the Year Award in Bulgaria and was selected by anonymous vote as among the 100 most-loved books by Bulgarians in the BBC campaign "The Big Read." It was filmed in 2020 as an international co-production.

His 200,000-word novel *Havra* (meaning something like *Fallow Lands* or *Wastelands*) came out in 2017 and also became a bestselling title with 29,000 copies sold in a nation of only seven million. In May 2018, *Havra* won the two most prestigious national literary awards: the 2017 Novel of the Year Award, and the H.G. Danov Prize.

His short stories included in the collections *A Brief History of the Airplane* and *Symmetry* have been translated and published in many languages. His story "Metastasis" was published in the collection *Best European Short Stories* by Dalkey Archive Press in 2018. His stage plays have been produced on stage in Bulgaria and the US (La Mamma Theatre, New York, 2014, Chicago 2020) and have won numerous prestigious awards.

His latest novel *The Tail* was published in 2021, and topped the national best-selling charts for five weeks. It was nominated for the Elias Canetti National Literary Award. A stage play based on the novel, directed by Javor Gardev, is now having a successful run.

Zachary Karabashliev lives in Sofia with his family.

## THE TAIL

### Summary



Pavel Panev (early 40s) is a dramaturge at the National Theatre; he has one successful novel, several staged plays, and a loser of a son from a previous marriage.

Pavel is now in a serious relationship with an attractive and intelligent woman—Nevena (early 30s)—and they are about to get engaged. She has just started a promising career as a human rights expert at an EU institution and the future looks bright; they are already planning a wedding and a baby.

A major challenge to their relationship comes, however, when Pavel finds out that while his fiancé was away on business, something inexplicable happened—she grew a tail. A real tail. And while Nevena refuses to see this as an anomaly, his world is shaken.

Well, not just his world.

Unobtrusively, and page by page it becomes clear that this story is taking place in a very near future, after the Second Pandemic has claimed the lives of most of the elderly population. The world is in crisis; not only are economies shaken, but the global political order is shattered. There are all sorts of protests everywhere, random and diverse rallies (both spontaneous and orchestrated) with ever-changing demands. It looks like humanity is in perpetual global civil war.

Like everywhere else, this particular country also is seething with discontent, yet, Presidential elections are coming.

Back to Pavel, who is shocked by the revelation of Nevena's tail and tries to share this with his older brother (a successful dentist, going through a midlife crisis himself), but finds out that it all sounds more like a writer's exercise rather than a real-life situation—everything seems even more absurd when put into words.

Nevena, on the other hand, is confident that her tail is not going to be looked upon with disapproval; it won't prevent her from committing to her responsibilities at work, and of course it won't change her love for Pavel. Her diversity—she assures him—is completely natural.

And just when political discontent reaches a boiling point, and the clashes between the protesters and the Government increase, Pavel receives an unexpected proposal—to be nominated as an independent candidate in the upcoming Presidential elections. It is a call to enter a political battle, to win and lead the country toward a new, and different, order. But what kind of order?

Seduced by the proposition, he considers it with Nevena, but she is outright opposed. She insists that this is not his calling, she warns him that he is being used, and she tries to persuade him to not run with the argument that nothing is achieved with good intentions alone.

The truth of the matter is, Pavel hasn't been able to finish his second novel for a long time now, and Nevena insists they both move to Strasbourg (for her work), where he can commit his time to writing—something entirely possible because of her well-paid position. He is tempted—should he choose the secure existence of quiet writing, or should he dive into an uncertain political career in a state torn by turmoil?

Eventually, he decides to abandon his flirtation with the Presidency, until one day, while Nevena is in Strasbourg, he witnesses how the Gendarmerie break up a peaceful protest, using unapologetic violence, and arrest the leaders under the pretext they had been planning a series of terrorist acts against the government.

A state of emergency is declared, the borders are closed, the country goes into a lockdown.

This is the moment when Pavel decides to run for President, and things start moving rapidly. Something makes him believe that he, and only he, is destined to lead the country toward the brighter side of history.

He starts meeting people who help his march to victory—Statev, an elderly ex-State Security apparatchik, now a behind-the-scenes-power-broker, is in charge of securing the finances, as well as blackmail material against his future enemies; Eva, an alluring media consultant prepares him for TV-appearances; Brother Stefan, a priest, has to secure the support of a newly-elevated Christian radical wing of the Old Orthodox Rite; Radoslav, a conformist scientist, is expected to get the support of the academic circles; Jimmy, an international legal expert, charts the path his future presidency can take in order to install a new military regime; Edwin, a movie producer, helps with the propaganda; and then there is Denis Danev, a rock-star philosopher, whose theory about existential somnambulism influences the views of the politician-to-be Pavel and adds additional strokes to the ideological dimensions of the world.

It seems that nothing can remain the same in the Pavel Panev's life.

And while his chances of winning the presidential elections grow every day, his fiancée's tail becomes the real obstacle for his newfound political calling.

The conflict between them sharpens, and they face a dilemma—either she loses her tail to stand beside him, or he leaves his political ambitions behind and accepts her anomaly.

The social turmoil grows, and the game of politics suddenly gets rough.

Does the virus of power infect Pavel? Does he realize the darkness he is delving into? What is he ready to sacrifice when the clash between his ideals and cruel political reality becomes inevitable?

The story told from the POV of Pavel moves freely between different genre registers—dystopian sci fi, political thriller, drama, burning social satire—without losing rhythm and focus, and climaxes in a bloody spectacle with a twist ending.

The Tail by Zachary Karabashliev is an imaginatively swirling story—phantasmagoric, yet realistic; at times touchingly tender, other times ferocious; funny, yet philosophical; immediate, but perpetual in the themes it explores—about the magic of love, the contagion of power, and the nature of good and evil.

Novel, 400 pages

ISBN: 9789542833970

Ciela Norma Publishing, 2021

## EXCERPT

*Translated by Traci Speed*

### CHAPTER ONE

*We were free, but alas, we didn't know it.*

### CHAPTER TWO

“Please, follow me.”

A host in a black suit and white shirt, two leather folders in front of his chest, moves his chin in something between a bow and a nod (don't get any ideas—I'm not your servant, I'm just doing my job), and leads us toward the interior of the restaurant. Nevena and I exchange looks. We don't even need to nudge each other, we read each other's thoughts and set off behind the pale crescent of baldness on the man's pate. We follow him further and further inward, into increasingly muted lighting and a cozy twilight between tables, past dark mahogany paneling, between granite walls with discreetly flowing water; we detour around spherical mossy stones and stalks of bamboo, and the soft fragrance of oleander envelops us. Or is it

jasmine? Or tangerine blossoms? Probably a synthetic blend of all three.

There is a disinfection fountain gushing out of a statue of the Buddha. We stop at it, then wipe our hands on warm black towels and continue. There are still some empty tables here and there, but with small “Reserved” signs on them. Women with their hair done, men in business shirts and vests, ties loosened, flickering light from white candles; faces leaning over hors d'oeuvres and colorful salads, fingers with expensive rings reaching for the stems of large wine glasses, lipstick-painted lips pulling away from exotic cocktails, tongues licking sugar along the rims of glasses, the usual noise of utensils, quiet conversation, and the barely discernible sounds of a piano somewhere. Karma Restaurant&Bar.

“And what the hell was a priest doing there?” Nevena says quietly, continuing the conversation we were having on our way to the restaurant.

I start to answer her, then I suddenly realize I'm walking in front of her, and I wonder if that's actually the correct etiquette—the man in front and the lady after him, or the other way around? Yes, I'm the knight in the castle with a torch, and she's the damsel of my heart, yes, that's it—the gentleman is always in front. But if a waiter is walking ahead?

I turn to her. “What do you mean?”

Her hand in mine is shaking nervously: “What was a priest doing there?”

“He wasn't a priest,” I say. “He was a clergyman. Or rather, a brother, as they call them in the Old Orthodox Rite now. Brother Cyril. They're friends. She's—”

“Why did we have to listen to that sermon just now?”

“She's obsessed with Brother Cyril.”

“Wasn't she a feminist? Or an animal rights activist or something? Isn't she with the Masks now?”

“Now she's with the Old Orthodox Rite.”

Nevena waves her hand, then continues. “And what about all those people with worried faces, with worn-out expressions, all that past that isn't past, that”—she makes air quotes with her fingers—“quasi-political community, class, clique, I don't know what to call it. What were they doing at a book launch? Which meant we had to talk to them, too... No, really, this is the last time I get talked into something like that.”

We reach the back of the dining room, and the host/waiter opens a door. He stands beside it with a gesture: Voilà!

A room clad in dark brown wood paneling, an old-fashioned sideboard, two portraits of unknown individuals, a table for two, a white tablecloth, a vase of ranunculus and a carafe of water. An antique wooden coat rack.

“It's so beautiful here,” Nevena whispers, smiling. I love her voice when she smiles.

“And so different now! How long has it been since we were last here?”

“Since then,” I say.

The waiter deftly helps her with her light coat, seats her at the table, and I sit down across from her. She unfolds the large, soft, white napkin onto her lap, and I, as always, touch the utensils one by one—this is a kind of ritual for me, a superstition, a tic of some sort. When I sit down, I have to touch each utensil—knife, fork, spoon—and only after that can I use them.

The waiter hands us the menu. His nose, viewed from below, is impressive—what an organ, my god, nostrils like dens that little bears could squeeze into.

“Thank you,” Nevena says loudly enough to get my attention so I’ll stop. *You stare*, she’s told me on more than one occasion.

*Sometimes I feel uncomfortable when you stare at people like that.*

*And how, in your opinion, do I stare at people?*

*With staring eyes.*

I’ve apparently been staring now as well.

She opens up the menu and continues. “Could we crack a window in here a little?”

“Of course.” The waiter reaches out and opens a window. A chill rushes in, but also the distant noises of the protesting crowd—penny whistles, football whistles, vuvuzelas, drums, booing, the deep rumble of a bass drum, the indistinct chants... As if this noise that the whole city is now sick of had been lurking outside the window, ready to slip inside at the first opportunity. The waiter shrugs his shoulders apologetically, and Nevena and I nod with understanding. We’re already used to it, everyone’s gotten used to it in these months, there’s nothing you can do about it; it’s like bad weather—sometimes it just lasts as long as it lasts. It seems they’ve set out from the Council of Ministers and they’re taking their usual route to Parliament, then marching further down and farther away.

“I’m starving,” says Nevena as she leans across the table conspiratorially.

“Did you not eat anything on the plane?”

“I wanted to eat with you.” She reaches for my hand gently, and I smile. The waiter takes advantage of the pause: “Can I get you folks started with some beverages?”

“Water, please,” she says, without shifting her gaze from mine.

“And this merlot,” I add, pointing to the wine list. The waiter nods, pours water into both glasses, and leaves. Nevena takes a deep breath.

“I’m sorry we had to go through that”—I start to say.

“Excuse me, but what was that!?” she exclaims. “What was that reading, those speeches, those words, all those words, words, words... And all that clapping? The applause?! She read. From her own book. For forty-four minutes. How can you

listen to your own voice for forty-four minutes, how can you listen to your own sentences? Why? There were at least a hundred and twenty people there, friends, fans—every one of them will buy the book. Why read it out loud? It’s like going to a restaurant, and the chef comes out and starts eating. Eating his own food, that he’s cooked. In front of everyone who was stupid enough to come...” She takes a sip of water from her glass. “I don’t understand.”

“Isn’t your analogy a bit...” For some reason, I start to say something in defense of the event, even though I was paralyzed by desperate boredom while we were there.

“The analogy doesn’t matter... What matters is that we, you and me, lost an entire”—she looks at her watch—“two hours and eight minutes in a stifling bookstore, instead of...”

“I’m really sorry.”

“A variety of crises are lying in wait outside, ministers are being changed like used handkerchiefs, institutions are being shaken up, and Madame Patrissia Moneva is reading out loud. What was that, in your opinion? Was it a novel? Was it a poem in blank verse? Or a requiem? In any case, there were no punctuation marks, and at one point, listening to her was suffocating, I couldn’t catch my breath.” And Nevena demonstrates by grabbing her neck with both hands in a parodic attempt to strangle herself. “Because she wasn’t pausing for breath, either, but she’s used to it—I would’ve fainted from oxygen deprivation, from the lack of any kind of normalcy. It was stifling, stuffy, suffocating...”

The waiter comes in with a bottle of wine resting on the white sommelier’s cloth over his left arm.

“Is it still stuffy? Should I open more windows?”

“Open the wine,” Nevena says impatiently, which surprises me, because she’s usually excessively polite. Then she adds a “please” and a disarming smile.

“Of course.” The waiter deftly drives in the corkscrew and pulls out the cork. He seems to hesitate for a moment about whose glass to pour for tasting. It crosses my mind that this may be intentional, to put me in my place, that he may have drawn the mistaken conclusion that I am not the one who orders and approves the wine, and that maybe he was trying to tell me I’m not the man of the house? But the wine splashes into my glass, and I impatiently thrust my nose deep inside it, inhale the invisible vapors, and now, here it comes—it’s always different, but this time there’s a rush of sunbaked sandy hills, a dusty dirt road, and coming into focus as well—oh, no—it’s that familiar curve, from where you can see the blue roof of the livestock incinerator; I start to wonder whether Nevena would know what it was, whether she used to pass by such buildings in her childhood, but no, she shouldn’t come close to this revolting stench of death, which somehow seems to stick to the

soles of your shoes, and you can drag it around for years, seasons, ages, as long as your your memory lasts, that smell of animal death... So I steer my thoughts in a different, less dangerous direction, down towards the poplars –the bend of the river is right behind them. A moment later, I also detect a meadow after a rain in the rich aroma of the wine, the smell of wild strawberries, mint, and even the bladder of a ball. Or rubber? A punctured tire, wet asphalt, summer? It's always summer in my childhood. And there's always childhood in a good wine.

And then, who knows how, a memory unfurls and rises up out of the dregs of the past—my father and I—we're on our way to fly a kite. Then the car gets a flat tire, and my socks are wet from the grass after it's rained.

I'm not a wine snob. Wine just has this ability to draw out completely buried moments from the undersea caverns of my consciousness.

Nevena patiently waits. I drink. I smack my lips. I approve with a nod. The two of us raise our glasses, and our gazes intertwine. The waiter starts to go.

"I'll leave you for a bit and I'll..."

"I'm actually ready." She points to the menu. "For a starter... hmm... Would you recommend this one?"

"Definitely."

She smiles, rubs her hands together theatrically, and turns to me: "And for you?"

"I'm gonna look for a few more minutes."

"Of course," says the waiter and leaves.

I take another sip and smack my lips again in that way I do. The wine is excellent, this particular vintage, and expensive, but then, there's a reason that she doesn't know about. Does she suspect? She squints her eyes and stretches her neck; I reach for her hand again. The wine seems to have relaxed us both.

"Now, tell me," I smile. We haven't seen each other in four weeks. We talk on the phone for hours, write emails, sometimes we have video chats, but separation is separation. "Tell me. How did the hearing go?"

She sips her water, takes a deep breath—there's been something enigmatic about her all evening—but just when she's about to start talking, the door opens noiselessly and a girl with a plump, pale, moonish face, wearing a waitress's uniform, appears beside the table. She comes up to me and hurriedly begins:

"Excuse me, I'm intruding, but I just wanted to tell you that your novel... That I read your novel as soon as it came out. I read it. And I'm still in love with it. And with... you. As, umm, as a reader, I mean. And I'm waiting for your next book. And I'm waiting for the movie version of the novel, when it happens, even though I don't know if I'll like it, actually, I'm sure I won't, but... still. Do you know yet who'll be in

it? No, probably not. Anyway, excuse me again for imposing, but I noticed you when you were coming in and I just couldn't help myself. I work here and I came to say... thank you. Thank you for everything! Just... thank you. For being here."

The girl spins around and disappears just as suddenly as she appeared. I start to say something as she leaves. Nevena gives a sideways nod and smiles. Not condescendingly, more with understanding, but still...

"I'm sorry" I murmur, embarrassed. Even now, I've never learned how to take compliments. Or tie a scarf. Or write short, meaningful autographs. I waste an unnecessary amount of time when I have to sign books, I'm always trying to produce something original, something different from what I've written to the previous reader. Which, I realize, is completely unnecessary—who cares about autographs these days?

Nevena shrugs her shoulders and smiles. "What are you sorry for? That people recognize you? That the girl..." she gesticulates, "loves you? Please, dear, is that what you're sorry for!?"

"I didn't want anyone to interrupt just now, but..."

She leans towards me, wrinkles her nose, and whispers conspiratorially, "Be happy, honey. Enjoy the applause. You deserve it."

I shake my head and wave my hand to move on to what's more important:

"The hearing. How did the hearing go?"

"The hearing was..." She searches for her words, then she gives up playing. "They offered me the position."

I laugh into the glass I've just taken a drink from, and wine splashes from my mouth, goes up my nose, and I'm choking.

"Huh? What?" I push my chair back, stand up, open my arms wide, and search for a napkin. Drops of wine have spurted from my nose; I wipe them off and cough. "They offered it to you? When? Weren't they going to make a decision in two weeks?"

"They called right before I got on the plane. It's still not official, but they offered me the job."

I jump up. "That's... amazing!"

I walk around the table, holding my arms out:

"And instead of telling me right away, you waited for that crap to finish?"

"Now do you understand why I was so...!?"

I hug her, and she rests her head on my shoulder.

"Furious."

"Say it again," I tell her, not loosening my embrace.

"What?"

"You know what. Say it again."

She shakes her head and says slowly, in one breath, "Managing Director for Common

Security and Conflict Prevention Policy in the European External Action Service.”

“Fantastic!” I move her away from me without letting go of her shoulders, shaking my head. She raises her glass. “Fantastic!”

“Cheers, darling!”

We clink glasses and drink. We sit down again. I look at her. My girl.

All those days and nights of preparation for the interview, all the sunsets and lazy mornings we missed, all the dinners that didn’t happen and party invitations turned down, those unwatched films, all of the concentration, the endless hours of work—it was all for a reason. It paid off.

“There is one small inconvenience,” she says straightforwardly and folds her napkin in two. “My colleague, the one I’m replacing, has to go back to Brazil sooner than anticipated, and there’re still a lot of details to iron out, a pile of documents to fill out, bureaucracy... The truth is, they need me urgently. I accepted, of course.”

“Of course.”

“I hope you don’t mind.”

“I don’t.”

“What I mean is, I’ll have to be in Strasbourg the day after tomorrow. So I have to leave tomorrow.”

The candlelight makes the black of her pupils come alive. It flows through her long eyelashes, glosses her lips, caresses her neck. I smile. I can’t stop smiling.

“Are you happy?” She touches my hand.

Are you happy?

Am I happy?

*I want you to be happy!* she’d once said to me while we were making love. And I remembered it. *I want you to be happy.*

“Tomorrow?” I swallow. It’s earlier than I expected.

“I have to. I’ll take the evening flight, but I’ll come back on Friday. It’ll be like that for a while.”



## KARASTOYANOV, Hristo

Hristo Karastoyanov was born on 22 February 1950 in Topolovgrad. He has worked as an editor in newspapers, as a playwright and director of the State Puppet Theatre in Yambol, etc. Now he is retired.

He graduated from Plovdiv University, majoring in Bulgarian language and literature. In 1981 he made his debut with the fiction collection *Cracked Asphalt*, which was awarded with a prize at the Southern Spring competition for debut literature in Haskovo (1982). His novel *Autopia: The Other Road to Hell* was one of the five new Bulgarian novels nominated in the first edition of the Vik Foundation contest (2003). He has won the Development Corporation Award for best unpublished novel (*Death Is Preferable*), the SBP Award for documentary fiction (*Notes on Historical Naivism*), the Golden Lanets Award for short story of the year in the competition of the newspaper *Trud*, the Chudomir Award for a humorous short story, etc. In 2012, his trilogy *Cuckoo’s Yarn* (*Teufelszwirn*, Roman in drei Büchern, Dittrich Verlag GmbH) was published by the Berlin-based publishing house Dittrich, and in December of the same year his novel *The Name* won him the Helikon Prize. The same prize was also awarded to the novel *The Same Night Awaits Us All* (2014), which the play *Geo* was based on, performed at the Ivan Vazov National Theatre, directed by Ivan Dobchev (2015). *The Same Night Awaits Us All* also won the Pencho's

Oak Award (2014) and the Elias Canetti National Literary Award (2015). In 2018, the book was published in the US, translated by Isidora Angel (Open Letter Books, 2018). Another of his novels, *Postscript*, was awarded first prize for fiction by the Culture Portal (2017).

Karastoyanov's texts have been included in various anthologies at home and abroad in Russian, Turkish, Arabic and English. The film *Follow Me* (2003), directed by Docho Bojakov, is based on his short stories. He is also known as a publicist—his articles have been published in many Bulgarian political and literary newspapers and magazines. He is married, has a son and grandchildren, and lives in Yambol.

## T IS FOR TASHKENT

### Summary



The novel *T Is for Tashkent* (Janet 45, 2021) can be read as part of a trilogy that includes *The Same Night Awaits Us All* (Janet 45, 2014) and *Life Has No Other Half* (Janet 45, 2018). At the same time, it is also a narrative that unfolds the larger political context of the events not only of the two novels, but also of the three books in *Cuckoo's Yarn* (Janet 45, 2020). With *T Is for Tashkent*, the author achieves a richness resulting from his long-standing interest in one of the most obscure and misrepresented periods of our history, which allows him to create a convincing and truthful interpretation of it in an artistically fictional way.

The narrative follows the fate of a Bulgarian journalist who, in the early 1950s, under the tutelage of

State Security, is allowed access to deeply classified archives relating to events in Bulgaria in the 1920s. Uncovering the documentary truth about them leads him to unexpected encounters with figures from the past, but also to the question of the fate of those who know the truth. In a behind-the-scenes world in which the long

arm of the Soviet secret services redeals the cards of Bulgarian public life, whether before or after September 9, 1944, the bearers of truth and decent behaviour are doomed, and the political players who take advantage of the situation write history due to their longevity and lack of morality.

Novel, 249 pages

ISBN: 9786191866465

Janet 45 Publishing House, 2021

## EXCERPT

Translated by Gergana Galabova

"The letter had been signed: The deceased Eliot Rosewater."

Kurt Vonnegut, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, or Pearls Before Swine*

The main character of this story was an editor or maybe head of the youth department of a newspaper in Sofia—a weekly one, a mouthpiece of something: of some institution connected to the ministry of one-thing-or-another, or the head office of whatever. The newspaper wasn't among the biggest in the country (it wasn't for example *Worker's Deed*—body of the party, *People's Youth* of the Komsomol, the quasi-governmental *Fatherland Front*, the trade unions' supposed paper *Labour*, or the orange *Agricultural Flag* of the agriculturalists). But it was not an insignificant one either. It was read in all of Bulgaria.

To put it simply—the character was a journalist, and everyone called him the journalist.

The story itself begins on a completely random Wednesday in that tense and anxious month of March in 1953, soon after the great mourning of Stalin's death and three to four days after International Women's Day.

Like an underground rumble, rumours spread in Sofia that several of the boys who had blown up the statue of Stalin in the Borisov Garden on the third of March had been caught, but the rest of the villains were still wanted. Those captured were promptly sentenced under the most expeditious procedure—to death, of course—only now, since Stalin was dead, everything was put into question. They were perhaps waiting for orders from Moscow on what to do with them. In any case, they hadn't been shot yet, but were being held in the Investigation Department of the Tenth Division (a.k.a. State Security) in the Central Prison, where they were being actively questioned<sup>1</sup>. Soon, however, a rumour would spread that even the

<sup>1</sup> Euphemism. It means beatings, inquisitions and mental abuse.

spreading of this rumour might lead to arrest and imprisonment, but it would be too late. One no longer knew what would earn them a beating.

Otherwise, that day in March smelled of a girl and a green wind blew over Sofia.

So that day, at about eleven before noon, the journalist crossed the large roundabout in front of the university, where tram number four was whistling towards Eagles' Bridge, and another one was already moving away back towards the Levski Monument. He skipped over the piles of pitiful snow along the sidewalk and flopped into the entrance of Tolbukhin number five. There, in the large apartment of a former humourist and artist (whom everyone would rather forget), was the newspaper's editorial office. He unlocked the mailbox, as crowded as ever, on which a clipping with the newspaper's masthead was carefully pasted, took the letters of the day, and went up to the newsroom. He went into his department's room, threw the mail on the huge cart-like desk (also left over from that wretched humourist's possessions), and opened the window to get some air. On the left was the new wing of Sofia State University, on the right was the roaring, barking, and screeching of the animals and birds awakened by spring in the Zoo, and front and centre, behind the scaffolding was a bustle: they had already half-built the pedestal of the future monument of the Red Army. The character in this story had seen the drawings of Vaska Emanuilova and Mara Georgieva for said sculpture, the designs by Ivan Funev and Lyubomir Dalchev for the groups at its base and was amazed by all this solemn splendour. Seeing how quickly the monument was being built, he was reminded of the 1940s when the people of Sofia welcomed the Red Army with autumn flowers on the streets, of the quickly put-together triumphal arches, which said "Eternal glory to the Red Army! ", and of how only three years earlier, in the spring of 1941, the same citizens of Sofia had welcomed the First Corps of the Wehrmacht on the same streets: the heavy columns of tanks, armoured vehicles, formidable guns with powerful tractors and trucks with infantry—the entirety of that Twelfth Army commanded by Field Marshal Wilhelm List. The flowers back then were different, of course, they were spring flowers. The arches were basically identical, the slogans at the top had said more or less the same thing, except that the eternal glory referred to the Wehrmacht. In the spring of 1941, the Wehrmacht and the Red Army were combat comrades, and in 1944 they no longer were... The journalist remembered well the poster of the two airplanes, hanging on the propaganda window in front of the Soviet Embassy. One plane was Soviet (red, with a golden pentagram) and the other was a German Pike (with the black cross of the Luftwaffe). The aviators were shaking hands in the sky, bombs were raining down from the aeroplanes—and they, too, were drawn with pentagrams and black crosses—and underneath, explosions

and gunfire were throwing London into chaos.

Under the drawing there was a Russian tune:

The brotherly nations  
met above the enemy city.  
Beneath each of their handshakes  
Imperial Britain cracks.<sup>2</sup>

Without a doubt—a nice poster. With this lack of ambiguity about it. They had brought it from Moscow and didn't take it down until that Sunday, the twenty-second of June. Summer of the year 1941 when everything suddenly turned upside down.

"What is life?" thought the journalist but then quickly cut the poisonous tongue of curiosity.

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At that time Sofia had already begun to resemble white-stoned Moscow more profoundly: the scabs left by the bombardments were being cleared away, and Commercial Street and St. Nicholas Passage were being erased from the very map of the city, their place soon to be taken by, according to Valko Chervenkov's inexhaustible plans, a great building, intended for the Council of Ministers of the People's Republic. And beyond it—starting from the former palace square and going all the way to Lege Street—the rigid shell of the future Party House already loomed.

In the cultural department of the newspaper, some splendid Soviet books were obtained through official channels, where there were excellent reproductions of paintings by famous artists depicting the magnificent moments of the Great October Socialist Revolution and how Lenin spoke at crowded meetings and rallies. The journalist liked to take these heavy albums and look at them in private, but sometimes, while flipping through their glossy pages, he would jot down terrible thoughts and questions in his notebook. "Did the leaders of the Revolution," he wrote, "believe themselves when they spoke at the rallies?" "Did they," he wrote, "think of a cold beer while they were making yet another speech to the workers and peasants?" "Did they never," he wrote, "need to piss in the middle of a speech?"

But then he would tear out the page, set it on fire in the ashtray and so his little secret notebook became thinner and thinner. In the end, all that was left was

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<sup>2</sup> The poster is real.



the purple covers embossed with the profiles of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, lavishly topped with copper ink and the inscription “Journal”, which he threw in the Perlovska River on a random Wednesday. He didn’t start another such journal. He didn’t need a notebook of futile courage anymore.

He closed the window and looked through the mail. Most envelopes were stamped *Imprimé* on the corners—obviously manuscripts, half of which he would throw in the bin—but one envelope was surprisingly light. Oblong and blueish, from thin paper, which was far from the rough paper of Bulgarian envelopes; it was patterned around the edges with red and blue diamonds, and the stamps were Soviet—one with Lenin and Stalin among soldiers and sailors in Smolny for sixty kopecks, two with Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya and how the fascists tortured her for thirty kopecks each, and one with the Tretyakov Gallery for twenty-five.

To put it simply—the letter was sent from the Soviet Union.

A letter from the Soviet Union—nothing extraordinary. Loads of people studied there already, for one reason or another, some were sent by the party as full-time students at the Maxim Gorky Literary Institute and others went to the mythical hundred-to-one MGIMO<sup>3</sup>! There was no address or name of the sender, but even that wasn’t something to mull over, because it often happened in those days.

He, of course, opened this envelope first. He cut it carefully with the knife (which was in the shape of a Georgian dagger and had been presented to him by a colleague at a Moscow newspaper, a mouthpiece of the head office of the corresponding ministry there).

There was one sheet of paper inside and on the paper—a single sentence.

“You are looking in the wrong place. You ought to be digging in the lawn behind warehouse № 2 in Ilientsi!

Kind Regards,  
Nikolay”

Naturally, this “Nikolay” meant nothing to him, and he had no idea what digging he was referring to, not to mention that it was unclear why it was necessary to dig precisely in Ilientsi. Namely, behind warehouse № 2. In any case, like everyone else, he had heard the rumours that the yard of the Military Academy was being intensively dug up and that bomb shelters were certainly being built there for the commanding staff of the army and for the party and state leadership in case NATO attacked Bulgaria and dropped the bomb on Sofia.

He turned the sheet over but there was nothing on the back, so he grabbed the odd letter and the envelope, dashed across the living-room of that apartment, pushed

open the grand front door carrying the dull gleam of the past, and barged into the editor-in-chief’s office.

The editor-in-chief raised the shaggy eyebrows of a former partisan of the Antoninov Squad, read the letter, glanced at the envelope, and finally asked what the gibberish was all about. The journalist shrugged his shoulders and replied: “Right!?”

And explained that it had arrived with that day’s editorial letters.

“So, I don’t know yet...” he said.

Then he mentioned the digging being done at the Military Academy and the fallout shelters, but the editor-in-chief interrupted him, announcing that it was all nonsense. And he explained that they were indeed digging, but not in the yard of the Military Academy, but in the infantry barracks, and it was not for bomb shelters, but for shelters for several Katyusha<sup>4</sup> rocket launchers from the Soviet Union. And these shelters could turn into warm parks for missile complexes, which would sooner or later be situated in Bulgaria. They would surely put missiles here! Sofia was a very convenient place for firing missiles at Greece and Tito’s Yugoslavia. This he knew for sure, because a comrade from the War Ministry had told him under the strictest secrecy.

The journalist doubted that the Soviet Union would be building missile units in the heart of Sofia, but he kept his mouth shut, of course. In any case, the editor-in-chief must have been smarter than the journalist because he pointed out the odd wording of the message, said that this monarcho-fascist language made him very uncomfortable, and then took a magnifying glass out of a drawer. Like a real detective, he looked at the seals on the top of the envelope and squealed:

“Tashkent!” he said, “Now we’re really fucked!”

“Sorry,” the journalist began, flustered, “did you say Tashkent? What Tashkent are you talking about?”

“Durak!” growled the editor-in-chief, “How many Tashkents do you know?”

“I know what Tashkent is!” snapped the other “But I don’t understand... wait, is the letter from...”

“Is the letter from... you nincompoop!” Scolded the chief and lifted the letter to the journalist’s nose. “Kör müsün the stamp, amsalak!? This nonsense was sent from Tashkent!”

The journalist was embarrassed.

“Stupid, stupid, but it was sent from the Union, boss!” he snapped immediately. “From the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic... so, excuse me, but what are we going to do in this case?”

<sup>4</sup> All Soviet rocket launchers were nicknamed “Katyusha” by privates (BM-8[1], BM-13, BM-31); this name remained after the war as a nickname for rocket systems for volley fire.

<sup>3</sup> Moscow State Institute of International Relations. Established on 14 October 1944. From 1994—a university.

He said it more with a sense of worry than bravery. Sure, he was almost the same age as the editor-in-chief, but while he had been studying philology in university, where he had listened to Boris Yotov's lectures, secretly lusting over the women in class, the editor-in-chief had been out fighting.

And that made a big difference.

"You are quite right, mate!" said the chief. "Something needs to be done, so get up and let's go to the superior."

He meant the most superior director at that head office, which the newspaper was a mouthpiece of.

He folded the sheet carefully, stuffed it into the envelope, and placed the envelope ever so carefully into his heavy leather bag. He snapped the locks like a pistol, and a moment later the two of them crossed the living room, where the clatter and clink of typewriters could already be heard behind the department doors. They descended the ever-dark staircase and emerged on the avenue where the editorial *Pobeda* awaited them. They threw themselves into the Soviet car, heavy as a small tank, and in about five minutes the *Pobeda*'s breaks were screeching in front of the head office. It was in the house of a factory owner: the house had been nationalised, and the factory owner had long since left Sofia. The armed guards knew them very well, let them in without any "who are you here for?" or "do you have an appointment?" or other such stern things, so the two of them went up to the floor where the big boss's office was. They brushed past the secretary, who didn't even bother to ask them what they thought they were doing. The big boss of the institution was from the Chavdar Brigade—which was a bigger deal than the Antoninov partisan detachment, and by now nobody was surprised that those from the Chavdar Brigade were higher in the hierarchy than those from the Antoninov. Besides, he limped majestically because he had been wounded in the Balkan Mountains (though evil tongues said it was by mistake) and held the rank of secret major-general.

He greeted them as always with his thunderous "How are you, how are you? Are you swatting flies with a howitzer?" He always greeted them like that—swatting flies with a howitzer—and it wasn't clear whether it was a joke or not. All in all—very partisan of him.

The editor-in-chief pulled the letter out of the bag and handed it to him across the huge desk. He explained the situation, admitted that it wasn't in his competence to solve it, which is why he and the comrade in charge of the department had come to consult the big boss on what measures to take, and so on. He mentioned the rumours concerning the digging around the barracks and at the Military Academy and what the digging was about and so on.

And the superior replied that neither was true.

"We are building a metro, comrades!" he said. "That's why we're digging—for the future metro of Sofia. But this is confidential for now, because NATO may send reconnaissance planes and launch saboteurs with parachutes to sabotage us at the very beginning!"

The editor-in-chief and the main character of the story, the journalist, were quite dubious, but kept their mouths shut. Actually, they did not keep silent, but exclaimed admiringly, "Wow! Seriously?"—which was the same.

The head of the institution exclaimed that he was completely serious, and then mumbled that they should stay on topic. He took the letter and the envelope with the stamp from the city of Tashkent, the capital of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, examined them most carefully and finally said: "Nikolay... How does this Nikolay know where we should dig?"

"And look at the wording!" called the editor-in-chief cautiously. "Who writes like that nowadays?"

"But he is from Tashkent," the journalist interfered. "From the Soviet Union..."

"Comrades!" said the big boss decisively. "Smells like an enemy provocation. We have to go to the big man, so get up and let's go..."

He meant the minister!

The minister was indeed a big deal. His ministry was strict but fair, the minister was driven around in a black *Stap*<sup>5</sup> with blue curtains and a third headlight on the front over the gleaming bumper. He had the stone eyes of a monument. He was happy with his job. Only ten years before he couldn't have dreamed of such a position. Ten years ago, he had dreamed of communism, back when he might have been doing something different from what he was doing. Now he was working as a minister and was content. He lived in an incomparable house in the *Knyazhevo* neighbourhood, a two-storey house with a vineyard in the front and a huge yard in the back. It belonged to some merchant, a Jew, of course, whom the previous government had deported to *Durankulak* in the spring of 1941, according to Part Two and Chapter Four of the Law for the Protection of the Nation, and the new government had simply forgotten to send him back, so the man left for the new State of Israel soon after. The house was taken care of by a housemistress, the yard by a gardener, and he had a private secretary in the ministry: pretty and discreet.

What more could you want?

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<sup>5</sup> *Stap*: made in "Stalin Plant," an almost luxurious seven-seat car, copied in 1945 from the Packard Super Eight (Stalin loved Packards). It was made up until 1961. In its convertible version, generals inspected troops during parades and drove high-ranking foreign guests. Yuri Gagarin was met by such a car in Sofia in May 1961.

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He accepted them swiftly—as if he had been expecting them. He always made such an impression. While the young secretary served coffees, tea for the minister, glasses, and a bottle of Armenian cognac on the small table in the corner, the minister stood quietly by the open window. The window overlooked the courtyard of the Sixth Secondary School, and in the courtyard boys and girls were playing dodgeball. Somewhere from the two floors of the school the song "Suliko" could be heard—inharmonious but powerful. Then the secretary quietly closed the double door, upholstered in black leather, and the minister sat opposite them: the three of them stretched out on the sofa on one side, he in the leather armchair on the other side. He poured a finger of cognac into the crystal glasses, and they reached out one by one—in order of seniority—for the crystal sugar bowl, neatly dropped sugar into their coffees and set to work, stirring them carefully...

The head of the institution had already said over the phone what issue they wanted to discuss, so the minister first addressed the digging around Sofia and the rumours about this digging. He told them that, yes, digging was being done, but the rumours that supposedly explained why it was being done were absolute nonsense. That's exactly what he said—that they were absolute nonsense. He could tell them exactly what was going on.

"But comrades," he said, "let's be clear. For now this must remain between us. Here, I mean, in this cabinet. Not that I don't trust you," he said, "but I want you to give your honest Communist word that you won't go blathering here and there."

They swore to take the secret to their graves, and the minister joked ominously.

"That's right," he said, "because this is about graves. Nameless graves."

And indeed, he told them how, a few months before, in a forced labour camp in the middle of nowhere, on the other side of the Balkan Mountains, some idiot taken there for whatever reason—a sergeant-orderly from the tsar's army—who had kept his mouth shut for a long time, suddenly spoke out. And he said he could say exactly where the hundreds of missing persons had been buried since the spring of the year 1925. He said that it had taken place somewhere in Sofia. They were thrown into hastily dug trenches, while the sacks were still being tied around their heads. And supposedly he could point out the place. He had participated in the suffocations, and one night he wanted to see what happened to the bodies, whether they were being burnt, whether they were being buried somewhere, so he secretly got into one of the trucks, which transported the corpses. So, he knew! He was not from Sofia, so for that reason he could not tell the address, but if the authorities wanted, he could take them there.

Immediately they grabbed him from the camp, gave him civilian clothes to put on, threw him in a jeep and took him to Sofia—so they could interrogate him better here. On the way, the idiot wanted to take a piss and somewhere in the Iskar Gorge the boys—two young militiamen—let him go to the ditch to do his business. And he, fool that he was, tried to run away. So, the boys lifted their Spagin guns and shot him to ribbons.

That's what the boys wrote in their reports when they got back to Sofia, neither their superiors nor the minister had any reason not to believe them; they were punished a little bit of course, but only so they wouldn't go unpunished.

"A durak!" he explained, "what do you expect from a *durak*!"

The minister was very fond of Russian words. He did not know Russian, but casually inserted here *druzya*, there *panimysh*, a little *tavarysh*, now the deadly *durak*.

Otherwise, it had been clear for a while now that somewhere in Sofia there were indeed nameless graves where, in the rainy spring of 1925, the victims of the terror had been shoved into sacks and thrown. But nobody talked about it...

The journalist suddenly raised his hand like a schoolboy, apologised for interrupting, and asked the minister in astonishment why this thing was a secret. Wouldn't it be good to know what and who the victims were, and who the murderers were?

The minister smiled, and his look was one of such leaden condescension that the main character felt very foolish.

"Young man!" he said, "are you seriously asking or are you doing it just to keep up the banter?"

And then he asked the editor-in-chief of the newspaper if he was sure they vetted their employees well enough. The editor-in-chief immediately felt dizzy, but the minister waved it off and most seriously explained to the young man that the problem was one of national importance.



# P

## POPOV, Alek

Alek Popov is the author of several novels: *Mission London*, *The Black Box*, *The Palaveev Sisters in the Storm of History*, *The Palaveev Sisters on the Road to the New World*, the collection of essays *The Radical Thinker's Companion*, as well as a series of short story collections, including *Advanced Level*, *Transition Myths*, *Body Weeds*, etc. He is among the most translated and read Bulgarian writers with more than 40 books published abroad. Alek Popov is the co-author of the screenplay of the film *Mission London*, based on his eponymous novel, as well as of several plays staged nationally and internationally. He has won a number of literary recognitions, including: the Helikon Award for New Bulgarian Prose (2002, 2013); the National Drama Award Ivan Radoev; the Elias Canetti Prize, the Helicon Flower for the best-selling book of 2007 and 2013, the British Pen Center Award for Literature in Translation, the ProzaBalkan Award for Contribution to Balkan Literature (2019) and others. Alek Popov is a corresponding member of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in the department of Arts.

## MISSION TURAN

Summary

“The East is a subtle affair...”

From the Soviet movie, *White Sun of the Desert* (1970)



The descendants of the ancient Bulgarians have been found! The question is—who will they vote for?

In faraway Turan, a small backward republic in central Asia, an expedition from faraway Bulgaria, a developed, rich country within the EU, searches for the cradle of the once-great Bulgarian nation. Professor Nestorov is convinced that the locals are direct descendants of the proto-Bulgarians and is ready to measure thousands of heads to prove his theory. And elections will soon take place in Bulgaria. The nation suffers from a demographic decline, politicians' ratings are falling. What could be better than finding new Bulgarian voters to cast the appropriate ballot?

The historical mission to integrate the

newly found blood brothers falls upon Professor Dokuzanov, the chief ideologue of the Keepers Order News TV Channel, an expert in the construction of authentic ancient fortresses, a peddler of myths and ceremonial wine mugs made from the skulls of long-dead Byzantine soldiers.

A dizzying series of absurd and comic situations ensues. Popov transports the reader into an exotic world of adventure and tumultuous love affairs, of dictators and free steppe riders, a world of songs, shamanic spells, and dancing on the thin ice of big politics. But under the star-covered dome, in the vast steppe, eternal questions continue to flare up: who are we, where do we come from, why are we here?

An allegorical story, as absurd as it is plausible, in which the small folk are nothing more than a bargaining chip. But their free will, which is seldom taken into account,

can disrupt the geostrategic plans of the fat cats. And perhaps even change the ethnic map of old Europe...

Alek Popov's healing laughter comes to help us outlive our national complexes and delusions about our glorious past and look at the future with new eyes.

*Mission Turan* comes exactly twenty years after the release of *Mission London*, the emblematic first novel by Alek Popov, translated in 17 languages so far. *Mission Turan* started out as a movie project and gradually acquired the texture of prose. The "quest for roots" is the core theme around which issues of corruption, demographic crisis, fears of migration and lack of democracy revolve. The novel takes an ironic approach to the phenomenon of rising nationalism in Eastern Europe and tries to see it in the broader context of the search for identity—a trend unfolding on various levels in post-modern societies all over the world. The plot is set in an imaginary land: the remote post-Soviet republic of Turan—the supposed cradle of the ancient Bulgarian civilization, ruled by an unscrupulous local autocrat.

Although a work of fiction, *Mission Turan* is based on long and meticulous research. Following the steps of his main characters, the author ventured out to South Siberia disguised as an anthropologist. He also spent several months in Budapest as a writer in residence with the Institute of Advanced Studies at CEU to explore the Hungarian tradition of the "quest for roots" drawing inspiration from the exploits of Arminius Vambery and Sándor Csoma de Kőrös.

Novel, 412 pages

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## EXCERPT

*Translated by Velina Minkoff*

Prologue

*Budapest, 1993.*

The young man strode hastily along the Chain Bridge toward Pest. It was just after noon on a sullen day in March. The pedestrian walkway vibrated with the rhythm of bustling traffic. In the line of cars, mainly second hand, there was still the occasional Lada, a Trabant or a Skoda, remnants of the fast-fading tangible heritage of socialism. The wind whistled through the metal poles of the bridge. The wide strip of the Danube River was streaked with small, disheveled waves. The man stared at the tourist boat crawling against the current toward Margaret Island. Its deck was perfectly empty. He thought about how he had spent a year in this town without once taking a tour around the island with one of these boats. In fact, he barely left the libraries, and now he was suddenly pierced by an unclear sense of loss. His gaze went from the dainty white towers of the Fisherman's Bastion to the gloomy façade of the Royal Palace. At its foot gaped the throat of the tunnel hollowed out of the Buda hill. The young man flinched, glanced at his watch, and quickly went on his way. The wind pushed the hood off his head several times, revealing a shock of black hair and the pale face of someone who had read many books. He was dressed in a greenish overcoat and sagging jeans and clutched a scuffed leather bag under his arm. He had the look of a man who had lived through the collapse of communism without noticing the changes around him, absorbed in some idea of his own that had completely consumed his attention.

After reaching the end of the bridge, the young man turned left towards the imposing neoclassical building of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, perched on the banks of the Danube. He showed his reader's card at the security booth, and the attendant gave him a polite nod, as he was already used to seeing him almost every day. However, instead of heading to the reading room of the Oriental Library as he had done before, the young man swerved toward the academy restaurant. He was stopped at the entrance by a particularly haughty lounge manager in a battered tuxedo and bow tie, with the air of a guardian at the gates of paradise.

"*Kihez jött?*"<sup>1</sup> he asked unceremoniously, fixing a disapproving glare on the young man's shapeless shoes.

"I have an appointment with Professor Messarosh," he relied in relatively acceptable Hungarian.

<sup>1</sup> And where are you going?

“*Mi a neve?*”<sup>2</sup>

“Nestor Nestorov.”

The lounge manager checked the thick notebook, which lay open on a special stand. His index finger slid down the pages and he nodded. Nestorov proceeded to barge into the restaurant, but the man stopped him yet again:

“*A kabátot adja le a ruhatárban.*”<sup>3</sup>

After about two minutes the young man returned, now wearing only a sweater, under which the edges of a wrinkled pink shirt were showing. The restaurant was half empty, and the sounds of a muffled waltz filled the air. The heavy chandeliers and red plush curtains seemed frozen in the time of Franz Josef the First. Utensils and dentures clattered softly. An elderly gentleman beckoned him from the table by the window.

“Professor Messarosh, I apologize for being late,” mumbled Nestorov. “I had to consult the Archives one more time...”

“A glass of champagne for our guest,” Messarosh turned to the waiter, who had precipitated himself to their table. “And one more for me. Relax, young man! You deserve it!”

Messarosh was a vibrant old man with a snow-white beard and a moustache curved like a pair of saber teeth. He wore a square black skullcap with a tassel on his head, and a cherry-red velvet waistcoat with braids of black string and gold brass buttons under his jacket. He was one of Hungary's most eminent Orientalists—the one who had continued the glorious work of such passionate explorers of the East as Ármin Vámbéry, Ignaz Goldziher, and Gyula Germanus. In the last year, Nestorov was fortunate to have studied with him on a grant from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

“To your health!” the professor raised his glass. “I daresay you are now sufficiently prepared to conquer the heart of Asia.”

“What are you saying!” Nestorov blushed. “My quest has only just begun.”

“Learning is a lifelong process,” Messarosh agreed. “But in this one year you have made remarkable progress. Rarely have I met such a motivated young scientist. What are your plans from now on if I may inquire?”

“I...”

“One moment, please!” the old man interrupted. “Let us order first. You have probably not had breakfast. It shows. I can bet that you are starving. I would recommend the fish paprikash. Here, they prepare it with Wels catfish from the upper basin of the Danube, somewhere above Visegrád. Where the catfish comes from is of utmost importance. Whether they fish it out before Budapest, or after, you realize why... And a bottle of furmint, of course!” the professor smacked his lips voraciously.

<sup>2</sup> What is your name?

<sup>3</sup> The coat check is over there.

After the waiter had left with the order, he turned once again to his guest: “So, where were we? Your plans. I understand you fly to Sofia tomorrow?”

“Yes, I’m going back to Bulgaria,” Nestorov confirmed. “I intend to complete my doctorate at the Institute of Ethnology with the Bulgarian Academy of Science. And, of course, try to organize an expedition to Central Asia.”

“In search of the ancient Bulgarians, huh?” Messarosh snickered.

“I am sure the descendants of our ancestors are still out there somewhere. Perhaps under a different name and even a completely different appearance. Or rather, the opposite: we have become different, and they are the same...”

“The theory of the lost people,” the academic noted with a tinge of skepticism.

“I will find this people!” exclaimed Nestorov excitedly. “Whatever it costs me. I consider this my highest patriotic duty.”

[...]

## 1.

*25 years later...*

The camper van drifted along the cracked empty road, rocking gently to and fro like an overloaded boat: a mid-range 2001 Fiat Ducato, with a convex visor over the driver's cab and an angular body. Behind the wheel sat a young man in his mid-30s, his face elongated with fatigue, his scalp discreetly but visibly balding. He wore a light-colored shirt rolled up to his elbows and a khaki safari vest. Sprawled out in the seat next to him, leaning her knees against the dashboard, was a female in denim shorts and black canvas combat boots laced up to her calves. From time to time, the man behind the wheel would instinctively divert his gaze to her long legs, whereupon the vehicle would subtly swerve to the left. The young woman had glossy raven-black hair in a long, heavy braid that fell over her shoulder. She wore a sagging grey tank top, with the fuchsia-pink straps of a sports bra protruding from under it. Her blue eyes roamed the infinite space outside the window. She was as unconcerned and absentminded as only a 25-year-old girl could be. The wires of a pair of headphones stuck out of her ears. She shook her head to the rhythm of the music, sporadically emitting sequences of irritating sounds that resembled the popping of bubble gum of varying density and size.

“Do you have to do that all the time?” he asked her.

The girl paid no attention to him, she obviously did not hear him. He repeated his question, louder this time. She removed one headphone and perked up an ear.

“Do what?”

“These sounds...”

"You have something to say about my beatboxing?" she raised her eyebrows.

"No, but... Aren't you tired of it?"

"No."

Suddenly there was movement in the back of the van. A ghostly silhouette emerged from the bunk bed and threw down the sleeping bag he had been covered with. Still sleepy, the man looked around uneasily, as if unable to comprehend where exactly he was. He reached for his glasses, put them on, and pulled back the dusty curtain hanging over the window. His broad silver beard quivered with excitement.

"Khronev!" came a cry. "Give me our coordinates!"

The man behind the wheel winced. He turned his head, at which the vehicle swayed sideways again, but he promptly brought it back within the limits of the road. The beard jutted out from between the front seats, together with an imposing shaved skull.

"We're in Turan now," Khronev reported, "We're on the route you mapped out, Teacher."

"Why didn't you wake me up?"

"Because you were sleeping."

"Admirable logic!" the older man angrily shook his head. "Did I not tell you to wake me up when we get to the Sayan Mountain pass?"

"She said we should let you get some sleep," Khronev nodded in the direction of the girl and added: "You didn't miss much."

"Stop!" The shrill cry echoed in his ears.

The camper van plowed into the rough road surface. The door swung open, the bearded man rushed outside, wearing a long-sleeved white flannel shirt and baggy trousers with his suspenders down. He took a few steps toward the vast expanse that stretched beyond the highway, after which he slumped into the grass. He plucked a few blades, took a deep breath, and let their scent fill his lungs. For a moment he felt dizzy. It was like kissing a mysterious beauty of the steppe. Her breath, saturated with the perfume of unfamiliar herbs, filled the hollows of his body, and ascended to his brain. Tears glistened in his eyes. The land of the ancestors...

"Daddy! What's wrong with you? Are you OK?" the girl called out behind him.

He did not move. He turned to the wilderness, searching for something with his eyes. Some kind of sign, perhaps. Recognition for all the efforts and sacrifices to get this far—to the geographical center of Asia! Something that would, be it only for a moment, lift the veil from the ancient mystery. Something that would shine and send a signal. Welcome! We have waited so long for you! But nothing noteworthy was visible on the horizon, save for a few whimsical clouds, tinged by the sunset,

stretched over the monotonous landscape. It was early May, life was flowing into the steppe, though still timid and invisible.

"Professor Nestorov..." Khronev stepped forward hesitantly.

Nestorov stood up and smoothed his beard with dignity. His assistant and his daughter watched him with a mixture of concern and respect. So be it, the professor chuckled to himself, little oddities only fuel authority.

"Children," he said with an air of importance. "It is important to arrive, but it is even more important to continue. It is too early to celebrate. The real work is yet to be done. All aboard!"

[...]

## 11.

Naidan ran to the Hummer and returned with a frosty bottle of Beluga vodka, delivered from the Boss's personal fridge. Along with it, a voluminous jar of red caviar materialized on the small table. Nestorov and Khronev were still on pins and needles, though the immediate danger had passed. Kosara had gone to change and freshen up, but was apparently in no hurry to join the company. Nalumbayev generously filled the metal camping cups of the anthropologists, then poured himself some in a special crystal goblet, adorned with a gold monogram of the letter N.

The two bodyguards stood at a respectful distance behind him, while about three hundred feet away, the locals squatted aimlessly around, wondering what had led to this unexpected turn of events.

"Drink to Bulgaria! To comradeship, *za drujba!*" Nalumbayev raised a toast.

"To comradeship, *za drujba!*" the scientists repeated with exaggerated enthusiasm.

Nalumbayev downed his goblet and shot the others an inviting look. You can't scare us with vodka, Khronev said to himself and poured the contents of his metal cup down his throat. He then boldly plunged the knife into the jar of caviar, smeared it thickly on a rusk and crunched away.

"Right, *tak, tak...*" Nalumbayev nodded with approval. "Have appetizer! *Zamezi!*"

The last word rang out somewhat differently and the two scientists suddenly realized that it was spoken in perfect Bulgarian. Nestorov looked at him, stunned: "You speak Bulgarian?"

"Ah, Bulgaria..." Nalumbayev sighed and poured another round of vodka. "Not been there in so long. I study in Sofia Institute of Mining and Geology! We develop Michuro-Kutai oil field back then. We have one professor, Ramovski, he teach us make wonderful *rakia*. Rakia with salad appetizer, ha-ha. You know how to live! Not much ores and minerals, but human potential very high. It is why you are rich! I am

leader with experience. And I tell you—people, *narod* is true fortune of country. Give me *narod*, brother, see what miracles I make! Not these...”

He turned to the Turanians squatting around and angrily shook his fist at them. His Bulgarian seemed to thaw slowly after a prolonged stay in a deep freezer and was becoming increasingly fluent, although still under the heavy influence of Russian.

“So, you what, *viy chto*... what exactly are you researching?”

“According to a certain hypothesis, the Ancient Bulgarians originated here, then they went on their way...” Nestorov picked up with the specific gleam in his eyes, which lit up every time he had the opportunity to present his theories before an unenlightened audience.

“From where, *otkuda*? From Kongurdurk!” Nalumbayev exclaimed in disbelief.

“No, not exactly...” the professor immediately insured himself. “The territory in question is much larger. It spans all of Turan, all the way to the Mongolian Plateau. To the west, it reaches Altai and the Misunin Valley to the north...”

“You have no business in Altai!” Nalumbayev cut him off again. “The truth is here! Those Chelkans and Tubalars will rob you.”

“Yes, yes, this is the center!” Nestorov agreed diplomatically. “That is the reason we started with Turan. We will look for proof of the kinship between the Bulgarians and the local population. I am convinced we will find an answer to the question.”

“But you say Bulgarians went away from here, no?” Nalumbayev was puzzled.

“Part of them went away, part of them”—a mysterious pause followed—“perhaps stayed? That is the big question. Who are we and where did we come from?”

Nalumbayev gave the professor a playful thump on the shoulder. “We brothers, *bratya*! I knew! Already in Bulgaria, I felt!”

“It is too early to tell,” the professor shook his head. “At the moment, we are applying a classical method. We measure the heads of the local population and run their cephalic index through the database at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. According to science, there are three main types of humans: mesaticephalic, brachycephalic, and dolichocephalic, which in turn are divided into subgroups conforming to national and regional characteristics.”

“Unfortunately, we’ve encountered a number of obstacles,” Khronev intervened when he saw the high-ranking guest beginning to lose interest.

“Who obstacles the population to get measured?” the president squinted fiercely.

“Well, the... population.” Khronev pointed in the direction of the village. “The locals insist on being paid for each measurement procedure and our budget is quite limited...”

“Agh, the scum, *svolochi*!” Nalumbayev turned toward his compatriots and waved his fist in the air. “You obstacle my friends! I teach you!”

He called Naidan over with an imperious gesture and began whispering angrily in his ear. The young man nodded a couple of times and rushed toward the village.

“I wish these guys would get lost already,” Kosara thought as she looked out the window. She was starting to feel stupid, sitting there in the camper van, as if she were hiding, so she opened the door. Her hair was still damp. She was wearing wide long pants with bulging side pockets that she hoped would spare her some more insistent looks. But suddenly she realized that her stomach was bare. She had tied the ends of her shirt under her chest as always, out of habit. Or, rather, out of an instinct deeply embedded in her feminine nature that made her seek attention even when reason suggested otherwise.

She attempted to untie her shirt, but—too late. Azis Nikolayevich Nalumbayev fixed his gaze upon her navel, around which was tattooed an exquisite little rosette. His eyes began to spring back and forth like those of a cartoon character.

He rose from his chair as if hypnotized and murmured: “Beautiful maiden! I am once again sorry for inconvenience.”

“It’s nothing...” she said with a wave of her hand and smiled to herself—“maiden” was a bit much.

“How she blushed!” Nalumbayev said to himself tenderly. “Good sign. She is pure and modest, not some...”

“Pa-pa, Papa!” a raspy voice wailed behind him.

Nalumbayev turned around abruptly. The high priest was trembling with anxiety. The lofty figure of Naidan towered behind him.

“Altunbai!” the president eyed him with hostility. “You are the shaman of Kongurdurk. An authority, so to speak. I heard you instigated the people to bargain with the scientists from Bulgaria. How much do you think it costs to get you precious mugs measured?”

“We... Out of poverty, Papa,” stammered Altunbai.

“There is no poverty in my country!” Nalumbayev snapped. “Only greed for money! But me, I’m not like that. That’s why I sit here now and let my head be measured! Completely for free! And don’t any of you dare to ask for money again or refuse to have your heads measured! In this country, only I can ask for money! Is that clear? If necessary, they’ll measure your heads twice! As many times as they say! This is an order, *eto prikaz!*”

“At your command, Papa!” Altunbai nodded hastily.

“And you return every rouble that you extorted illegally,” came the next order.

“We will return it, Papa! To the last kopek!”

Nalumbayev installed himself comfortably in the folding chair and motioned Kosara over with his finger.



“I’m ready,” he said with a disarming smile. “Let the young professor measure my head!”  
“Well, she is not a professor just yet...” Khronev could not resist.  
“She will be, she will be...” the president said, shaking his head. “An academic! If not in yours, in our Academy of Science, ha-ha... And you, don’t be jealous now!”  
“Come on, dear! You know how to do this,” prompted the professor.  
“I hate doing this!” she almost blurted out, but then she met her father’s stare. In it could be read such a desperate plea, as if his entire future, along with the future of the world and humanity depended on this seemingly inconsiderable effort.  
“Well, ok,” she sighed. “Thanks for the honor!”



S

## STAMBOLOVA, Albena

Albena Stambolova was born in Sofia. She holds an MA and PhD from Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. She works as an editor and translator and also writes in the field of literary and social criticism, foreign literature reception and psychoanalysis.

From 1990 until 1999, she lived in Paris, where she earned her MA in Psychology focused on semiotics and psychoanalysis in University of Paris 7 Jussieu. She has translated the works of authors such as Tzvetan Todorov, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Gaston Bachelard, Levy-Strauss, Madam de Staël, Marcel Aymé, Jacques Lanzman, among others. She also has worked and taught in the Universities Paris 9 Dauphine and Paris 3 Censier.

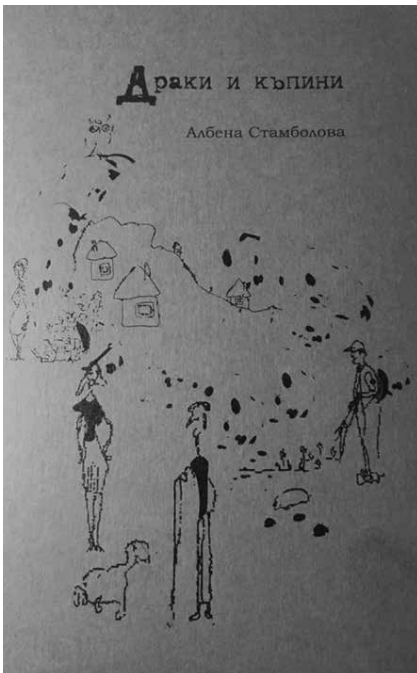
In recent years Albena has settled in Bulgaria working as a psychological and organizational consultant. At the moment she is working on a study of fairy tales and on a novel *The Diary of the Artist* (to be published by Obsidian, 2022). She also has a practice as a psychotherapist.

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- 2004: *Boleduvane v smurtta* [Malaise in Death] – psychoanalytical critical study (Kritika, Sofia, 2004).
- 2008: *Avantura za da mine vremeto* [An Adventure to Pass the Time] – novel (Obsidian, Sofia, 2008), nominated for the 2008 Helikon Prize.
- 2020: *Draki i kupini* [Buckthorn and Blackberries] – short story collection (Fakel, Sofia, 2020).

## BLACKBERRIES

### Summary



*Buckthorn and Blackberries* is a collection of short stories united around a common theme: Bozhentsi, a small village in the Balkan Mountains located between Gabrovo and Veliko Turnovo. The village was founded in the 14th century and is now an architectural-historical preserve. Currently it has around 30 permanent residents.

Each story in the collection is an experience of one of the hidden faces of Bozhentsi. One of the unifying threads of the book is what it is like to acquire the oldest house in the village and to try to solve the puzzle of its life so that it will allow for human presence. The gaze the books turns on people connected to the village is also a possible step towards understanding the place. Such figures include both the

permanent residents as well as the temporary inhabitants and even fleeting visitors to the village. The message that every individual sends through his or her portrait creates a kaleidoscopic human presence not only in the village, but possible in every town on the earth. The third through-line is the relationship between people and animals, plants and things, and is tied to the search for a path towards the spirit of their existence, regardless of whether they belong to the animate or inanimate parts of the natural world.

The stories are connected through a personal journey towards a place that appears accessible only at first glance, but which quickly begins to fill up with attempts at being seen and understood. In this sense, the book is like a journey towards the mysterious life that everything in the world leads.

Short story collection, 136 pages

ISBN: 9789544112820

Fakel Publishing House, 2020

## EXCERPT

Translated by Ekaterina Petrova

They grow wherever there are no people, with their houses and their gardens.

They sometimes grow in people's gardens, too, as they do in ours, though sparsely—just a few thorny bushes that remain alien and accidental, somehow in disguise and inconspicuous. They don't even interfere with the garden's cultivation. Because they are not cultivated themselves.

Sometimes the world becomes permeable. I don't know how. I didn't go to the blackberries with a specific goal in mind. I didn't even know what they were. But I had the feeling that something was supposed to happen.

They grew all over the meadows above our village house in Bozhentsi. I would go to watch the ripening of the fruit, which looked like something between a wild strawberry and a mulberry. I would discover how thick and impenetrable, how impossible its thorns were. The blackberry bush is one big thorn. Its berries are concealed amidst the branches and once you pick the first few that are more easily accessible, you have to go into the bramble itself to continue. The blackberry bush does not put everything it bears on display. It forms entire rows of brambles that gradually take over the land, turns its back on potential consumers, and develops inward into a community of prickly shrubs that slowly thickens toward the center and becomes more and more inaccessible from the periphery. This is how an island

of tightly tangled and completely impenetrable brambles forms, and in the semi-darkness of these shrubs, the deep purple fruit is free to ripen, grow overripe, and fall off undisturbed. It is not for sale. The blackberry bush ferociously ensures its own survival by entangling everything that comes its way. People call these kinds of plants “weeds.”

I would go out and explore the blackberry jungles. At the end of the winter, they look quite helpless, since you can see and even poke something straight through them—an arm, a leg, a stick, or half of your torso, that is, your shoulder or head. But to what end?

Then the leaves quickly start spreading over the pubescent stems, which are long and thin like vines and outfitted with little spikes that latch onto everything they touch. Then, in the heat of the summer, the whitish-green fruit appears, which then turns red and very hard. It looks as though it will never ripen.

And then the magic starts—one by one the blackberries begin to grow darker, until they are almost black with a slight tinge of purple. If you try to pick them before they are completely ripe, it’s hard to pull them from their stems. If you do it once they are already overripe, they usually get squashed between your fingers, staining them with their indelible juice.

Blackberries have to be picked at just the right time, when they are ready to effortlessly drop into your palm while still retaining their juice.

This moment, however, occurs only after the jungle of an island has already formed, reaching up to seven feet high and acting like a living blockhouse.

So the blackberry bush does not like being picked and ignores any kind of civilization. It is only interested in becoming ever more tangled and dense. Eventually, it turns into something resembling dreadlocks. Bob Marley’s face could serve as the blackberry bush emblem.

Blackberries can never, ever be entirely eaten up. Not by humans, nor by birds or animals. A few here and there, surely. But many of them, most of them, all of them—they’re not meant for that. Instead, they serve the common prickly snarl, making it ever more protected and inaccessible. There is no such thing as a single blackberry bush. It always starts out growing like a curtain, which gradually turns into a wall, making it impossible to distinguish whether it has just one root or many.

Of course, blackberry brambles could be cut down with brush cutters or set ablaze. But those are features of human civilization and have nothing to do with the blackberry bush itself.

To me, the brambles seemed not just impenetrable, but innumerable as well. With every new outing, I would discover more and more bushes, all the way to the

cemetery, on its grounds, and beyond it. In this world and the other. It was precisely such contemplations about the boundary between this world and the other that had brought me to the blackberries in the first place. I didn’t even know I’d been brought to them. I would simply end up there, I would wake up there . . .

I would wake up, pull a sweater and a jacket over my pajamas, put on my hiking boots, and set out like a sleepwalker. The only difference was that I didn’t have my arms stretched out in front of me, though that would happen as soon as I got to the blackberry brambles.

The berries don’t all ripen at the same time. And thank God for that.

With a kind of insatiability, I would look for ripe blackberries. Dressed in my thick clothes like a bear, I would stand before the wall of brambles and start peering at it. At first, I would see nothing, then I would pluck one, and . . . everything would start at this moment.

The blackberries really are interconnected. As soon as I spotted one and ate it, others would start revealing themselves, calling out, glinting. The first would lead me to the second, and so on. I would eat them and they would fill me with bliss. A single blackberry only looks small. Once in your mouth, its otherwise warty-looking surface unfolds, spreads out, and fills it up. In your mouth, a single blackberry becomes enormous, its juice starts dripping, and your heart starts singing. The brain rejoices—a blackberry!

I always managed to eat as many as I wanted. I would reach even the out-of-reach blackberries. The branches were usually wet. With a snap-snap-snap, my clothes would constantly get snagged and then released by the thorns. I would get into impossible positions—crawling and creeping, then wriggling, snake-like and twisting like a spindle, stationary, then gradually unwinding like a living drill. I would advance by swimming through the prickly living sea. My fingers would stretch out, and just when I would think, no, that one is out of reach, another one would appear right in front of my nose. I would crane my neck with my mouth open and then, chomp!—I would either manage to bite it off or it would roll down my face and disappear somewhere down below, where I could no longer see the rest of my body.

Going in was always easier than coming out. But still, there were ways. Since my mind was busy thinking about eating rather than advancing, entering would somehow happen on its own. Snap-snap, from one snap to the next. But if you try to get out without thinking about eating, that is a sure recipe for panic. It’s impossible. The only way is to stop thinking about getting out, lose any sense of direction, and erase the human memory of vector movement, of forward and backward, of left and

right. Blackberries have no geometry, nor trigonometry; they don't even have 3D or 4D. They are like prickly water. It's better to swim around in the bramble without missing even a single ripe fruit, to forget about things like entering or exiting, and to simply keep moving, which allows for a certain degree of permeability.

As long as you keep eating and savoring its fruit, the blackberry bush lets you through. But if you simply try to barge past—you'll be brought to a halt.

Well, I guess you could try screaming for help. Right from the middle of the island. But who would help you, and how?

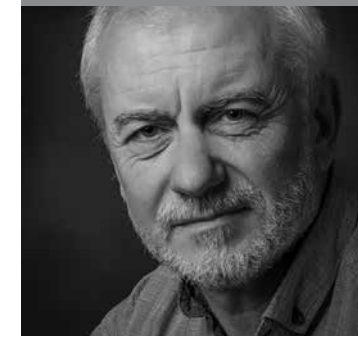
I would go there, day after day. I didn't know why. I half-heartedly assumed it was for the fruit, which I adored. I would come back with my stomach filled to bursting, but never brought any blackberries back home with me. I didn't like eating them outside of the bramble.

Morning after morning, still half-asleep, I would set out. There was something hypnotizing about these outings. I have no idea how many blackberries I ate altogether.

Lots, over several summers and several years.

Genka used to make us blackberry jam.

I never ate it.



# S

## STANKOV, Ivan

**Ivan Stankov** is a writer, translator and professor of Bulgarian literature at the University of Veliko Tarnovo. He was born in 1956. Stankov is the author of monographic studies on the works of Asen Raztsvetnikov, Yordan Yovkov, Dimitar Talev, Vasil Popov, Boris Hristov. He has translated from Romanian the works of Mircea Cartarescu, Dan Lungu and others.

Stankov wrote his own trilogy of short stories, *Memories of Water: Dm*; *Streets and Ships: Gm*; and *Names beneath the Snow: A7*. The collection *Evening Wedding* is his fourth fiction book.

Stankov's first book *Memories of Water: Dm* won second place in the Culture Portal's 2014 prose awards. In 2017, he won a special award from the Communitas Foundation for his book *Streets and Ships*. In 2020, he won the Helikon Award for his collection of short stories *Names beneath the Snow*.

## THE DRESS THIEF

*Summary*



*Evening Wedding* is a book quite different from the rest of Stankov's works. It has a face of its own. And its own voice. In this book, the author yearns to leave his own time and transport himself into someone else's, into events in which he could not have participated. Thus he has moved a hundred years back along the axis of time, to a period he knows well through his academic work. The city of Ruse is a big part of the essence of Ivan Stankov, as it is the place where he spent both his childhood and his youth. Stankov knows very well the town's streets, its people, architecture, colors, the smells of the Danube. And thus, the most appropriate time

and place come together to make way for the nine short stories in this collection.

In preparation, the author spent a year and a half in careful study of the old Ruse daily newspapers. He had to find stories that could easily become legends. These had to be strong stories, exceptional ones. The writer was inspired by reports of love stories that often ended tragically. He also used other information from the newspapers to fill these real stories with actual details from that time, such as the price of grapes on the market.

Ivan Stankov's vast literary experience, accumulated over his years as a teacher, as well as his constant interest in books and his sense of responsibility to the written word, have formed the author's specific style and very clean way of writing. Here is what the editor of the book, Stoyo Vartolomeev, shares:

"The main protagonist in this book is love. Not beautiful, romantic and sublime love, but wounded, rejected and burning love that leads to fatal outcomes. As one of the heroines says: 'You can't live without love, but too much love will kill you.' And all these strange stories from another time, set against the backdrop of a beautiful provincial town, live on in their new life, as love is not subject to the hands of time."

*Evening Wedding* will warm your soul and awaken sympathy for these desperate sufferers and sinners in love.

Short story collection, 244 pages

ISBN: 9789542620501

Hermes Publishing House, 2020

## EXCERPT

*Translated by Dessislava Toncheva*

No one knew where she had come from. No one remembered when she first appeared. People didn't even ask, they were afraid that if someone by chance found out, it would all end and she would disappear from this place forever. And who could imagine Ruse without her?

Some wiseacres said that she had floated in a large basket down the river from Vienna, others said that she had descended from the sky in the Statue of Liberty's outstretched hand. They only knew her name. Adela. It seemed to them that this woman was not only from out of town, but that she was from out of this world. Such beauty could not be born from a living mother. Over a cup of green tea at the ladies' matinees, and over plentiful dishes and cold bottles of white burgundy in fine restaurants, she, Adela, was all that was talked about.

She was everywhere. The annual ball of the Chamber of Commerce—there she was. Even standing at the end of the hallway, she'd still be at the center. The officers from the garrison's Christmas party at the Military Club—she was there, near General Nozharev. An unprecedented concert by the great Otto Liebig with the orchestra of Maestro Strandzhev in the Church Hall—Adela's in the front row. World chess champion Alekhine pops over to Ruse to play simultaneously against forty Ruse chess players—she's there, too. Alliance Française organizes a raffle party—could this happen without her? St. George hosts a premiere screening of *Dancing Lady* with Joan Crawford, Clark Gable and Fred Astaire—Adela's in the fifth row. The Trade Cooperative Bank was about to elect Stoyan Mitev and Todor Kogatev to its new management board—on the evening of the banquet she was at their table. She was at every place that called for the presence of an incomparable woman.

She was always accompanied by a silent older man with sickly skin, a blue distrustful look, and short white hair. He was rumored to be an investor researching where to put some money. The associations of insurers and shipowners, beet growers and distilleries, the teachers' union and the society of architects, the town hall, they all left luxurious invitations for reporting meetings and banquets at the hotel reception desk. And everyone hoped he would come with her. The cooperatives of barbers, bakers, shoemakers, and tailors also left invitations, though they did not have high hopes. This woman was of a much higher class.

The whole town would watch her come out of the Teteven Hotel with the investor on her arm in the evenings, then come back late at night. During the day he

disappeared, but she'd pop up before noon, walking around the more sophisticated shops and pacing up and down the central part and in the city garden. All the men had determined that she was his mistress, and no one dared cross the line of innocent flirtation. She was free, so free! She stood before any man, as if beckoning him, the wolf, to eat her up. She wouldn't stop until she'd spun the heads of a hundred men in one night. A hundred wives would swallow drily, burning on the inside, willing to give anything in this world if they could only look like her. If not for others, at least in the eyes of these scoundrels, their husbands.

She was so beautiful that even when someone was near her, she still seemed far away. Neck long, hands calm, fingers long and graceful, who could even notice that the cuticles of her nails were bitten down. Her décolleté, however modest, could not hide her breasts. Her walk was not for moving forward, but to silhouette her body under her clothes. She had an open face, like someone without any secrets. Her gaze absorbed everything and gave nothing back. Only a few assumed that, although she had mastered herself to perfection, this woman's soul was as restless as anyone's.

And her clothes... It was not enough to say that no woman in town before her had worn anything similar. It was as if she had come to change all life in the town and had logically started with the easiest part. On the benches in the gardens and on the terraces of the cafes, the ladies just waited for her to pass by. Then, eyes heavy, they'd discuss her latest dress with a waistline that was way too high, its indecent fit on her hips, its length right up to the middle of her calf. They argued over whether it was fine silk or padded Chinese crepe, whether the light embroidery around her neck was made by hand or not, whether the decorative ribbon tied around her waist was too wide. During receptions, before she arrived, small bets would be made on which dress she would wear—whether it would be satin, how far down her bare back would be exposed and whether she would finish it off again with some ghostly train, or whether it would be soft velvet decorated with metallic threads. Would the tip of her hem reach the floor or would her heels be visible as she walked from one group to another? And they'd discuss the colors, too, during the day the shades of green, blue and orange, always pastel, never bright, and in the evening—the darkest versions of red, purple and blue, never black. Adela's clothes filled half the time of the empty conversations in the halls, and she knew that, but she didn't mind. On the contrary, she seemed to defiantly seek this out. She preferred they talk about her clothes, rather than talk about her.

She seldom repeated her daily attire. Evening-wear—never. People wondered how she could fit so many clothes in a hotel room, no matter how big it was. The women did not merely observe her dresses, they'd study them, research them and spy on

them. Not even a month after she first arrived, the dresses and dress-suits she had worn began to appear on the streets. On some of the women the clothes looked good, on others the fat peaked through the silks and stockinettes, and no matter how tight the corsets were underneath, their breasts could not stand as upright in the necklines as hers did.

At receptions, Adela would speak freely about politics and trade, wholesale prices, stocks, music. She'd make saucy, witty remarks, on the verge of good manners, she'd sip from her tall, thin glass, and pass on to the next group. She'd rarely dance. Not because she couldn't—she could, and how! But the gentlemen didn't dare invite her much, though neither the investor next to her seemed to mind, nor did she. Who among all these men could forget that he'd been so close to her? No matter that it happened out in the open, in front of everyone. No one had, however, seen her with Ramadan. That was their deal from the start.

She noticed him for the first time at the entrance to the city garden just before noon. Only good manners stopped the people around her from turning their necks after her and after her tired-orange linen dress, the sleeves of which unusually ended slightly above the elbows. They noticed how the high rectangular neckline gently showed her collarbones and how above the left breast a lily of the same fabric the size of a human palm emphasized the feminine hills below. They observed how the fabric gently descended down her waist and down the curve of her thighs, and below the knees it ended with a slightly pleated cloche which playfully followed her footsteps. Adela walked beautifully on the ground and nodded to the familiar ladies and gentlemen. She was not pensive, but careful. It was as if someone had predicted that something would happen to her in the alley that day, but they had not specified whether it would be good or bad.

With senses like hers, which examined the world far beyond clothing, she couldn't miss him in this crowd of businessmen, bank clerks, and artisans. Beautiful women love to be noticed, but now she had to think like a hunter herself and called on the aid of all her one hundred eyes. As he approached her, under the orange of her dress and her underwear, under her skin and under her flesh, somewhere in her bones, a deep tremble passed through her body and rose up in a rebellion, the likes of which she had not had to suppress in a long time. She couldn't compose herself completely, there was no time, as their eyes met before the two of them did. Maybe that's how electricity was once discovered, she thought, as she felt thousands of amps flow through the air during those few steps. Her eyes remembered nothing of this brief meeting. Not even what he looked like or what he was wearing. All that remained was a frantic desire to repeat it all again.

The next day, at the same time, on the same alley, her hundred eyes shone with joy again for those few steps. This time they both nodded at each other ever so slightly, as one nods at each beginning. On the third day, however, he did not turn up on her path. She entered the garden, passed the first few benches, and he was still missing, not to be seen along the rest of the way. She couldn't stop, who was she waiting for? She had to keep walking but her legs wouldn't work. Suddenly, he appeared beside her and she trembled. He had walked up behind her.

This handkerchief is hers. Is she really an angel descended from heaven because it has the letter "A" monogrammed on it? No, she's no angel. More like a devil, and her name is Adela. She's dropped her handkerchief and is very grateful to him. But on the streets of Ruse it would do even the devil some good to walk with his bag closed, because of the likes of him. The handkerchief did not fall out, he'd just pulled it out of her bag. He was a thief. A thief? Nothing wrong with that, but she's not used to having things taken away, they're usually given to her. That's all well and good, but he has nothing to give, he's as "naked as a rifle" as the saying goes. Then let it be known that that's what he would give her. Well, if this is what she's ordering, it will be delivered to the hotel. But at midnight the doors are locked. There is no lock that could stop him. At least he should tell her his name. By no means, how can he be sure she won't give it to the police because of the handkerchief. He'd tell her after.

After what, she wanted to ask him, but he nodded and hurried onward. Would he really show up in her hotel room in the middle of the night?

He really did. He found out through his people on the hotel staff that when she and the investor returned late, they went upstairs, and he headed to room number two, the one that overlooked Alexandrovska Street, and she went to room number five, overlooking the Income Building. Their walking hand in hand was just for appearances.

Ramadan had opened hundreds of strange doors, but none were as quiet as the one in her room. It was as if it were made out of air, not wood. And Adela, who was trembling two steps away from him, was made of air, too, and so was he. It was all air and light from the orange moon that was just sneaking out of the window. Their hands were also of light, and they quickly found one another, as did their lips. He saw her body writhe like moonlit cigarette smoke and envelop him on all sides. He hid it within himself and raised it to its devilish heavens. Minutes, hours? Everything had faded into the warm darkness.

Well, his name was Ramadan. He came from Yuper, one of the villages near Ruse. His hands could do anything. He worked in a locksmith workshop. The money wasn't great, but how much money does a person need anyway? He steals just for the fun of it, to take his revenge on poverty. And his hands itch to do it. Even if they

catch him, they'd hardly put him in prison for petty things. Well, he'd lose his job because he only entered with keys, he never broke in. And that was that.

Through the shadows of moon, he saw her smile before kissing him wearily but very gently. I'm doing something similar, she told him in a whisper. She was a model in Sofia, but the owner of the agency demanded a private showing. Everyone in her industry did that, but how could she go to bed with such an ugly man. Even if he was a billionaire. So he kicked her out. She was immediately snapped up by La Dernière Mode. They paid her to walk their new models on the street, to show them off at balls and receptions, so that the wives of the rich could be deceived into buying the clothes. And purchases were going well, but they paid her too little. And she wouldn't be this beautiful forever. They also forbade her to have any intimate relations, that was the job of the old git with her. So Ramadan was now not only a locksmith and a thief, but also a conspirator.

A conspirator, he smiled. Aren't they all in prison now, because of illegal printing houses. He hugged her so softly, as if afraid that he would hurt her with his fingertips. He leaned his face close to hers so he could breathe in her breath. Shortly before she fell asleep, Ramadan stirred. He asked her why the room was blue when the moon was yellow. Without looking out the window, she pressed her face into his chest and laughed softly. Well, because the moon escaped with someone else and left the sky to take care of them by itself. As he got dressed, Ramadan sensed that she was sad, probably at the same thought. Neither the moon nor the sky care much for people like them. When he left, the door to the room was now made of wood, but it still didn't creak. As she closed it behind him, Adela quietly handed him her handkerchief, as if giving him everything she had. Ramadan understood and that saddened him because she deserved so much. So much.

The next day he went back to the alley. He couldn't remember the color of her eyes, they might have been greenish-brown with yellow sparks. But he found them so happy, and that was enough for him. At midnight in his apartment, he ritually spread Adela's handkerchief over his face, inhaled its scent, and cautiously walked back to the hotel to breathe her in. The next day it happened all over again. Every time he left, he'd ask if they would see each other again on the walkway. They would.

However, at the beginning of the following week she did not come. Ramadan frantically circled the entire central part of the city. Evening came around, abundant with balls and parties. In the restaurants. He didn't notice that others were also looking around secretly, all looking for Adela. For several days he kept an eye on who came in and out of the La Dernière Mode shop. There was no sign of Adela or the investor. A few days later, the old man came back, this time with a different

beauty, who also changed her dresses every day. They had replaced Adela. Adela was gone. And she wouldn't be coming back. Apparently the old man uncovered the conspiracy and reported it to his superiors. He met them one evening, him and the new one, on their way to the Military Club, and it seemed to Ramadan that the man was smirking at him. He was not angry, the man was just doing his job. He was pained by the thought that a woman with Adela's beauty and profession could not belong to any particular man, let alone one like him.

And Ramadan was so wretchedly literal-minded that there was nowhere else to go from there. Was there? He'd show them! He was done with the petty things and started stealing for real. During each robbery, he carried Adela's handkerchief with him, inhaled from it, and only then took out the huge key ring from under his jacket. He only stole clothes. But not all kinds, only dresses. And not all dresses, but only the ones she had worn before they were sold in that store. He rationalized his actions, telling himself that by stealing he punished the rich for their money and the rest of the world for Adela. He followed women to their houses, scanning the street, the houses next door, the door handles, the locks. He stalked them, and when they went to parties and theaters with their husbands, he went in. Sometimes—into two or three houses at a time. He took nothing but the dresses he needed. He would soon collect them all, down to the last one, put them in a car like a dowry, and find her in one of the towns. A woman like Adela couldn't hide even in Paris.

He kept the dresses in his rooms. At first he arranged them carefully on hangers in the closet. He neither sniffed nor caressed them, he just stared at them and stared at them all night until he saw Adela's moonlit hands come out of their sleeves as if made out of smoke. Then he'd spread out the latest dress at the other end along the bed, lay down, and try to fall asleep. That's when the air door of his room would open, Adela would come in, made out of air, and lay between him and the dress until morning.

When the closet was full, he began to roll them up in a dresser. When the dresser was full, he laid out a sheet on the floor. As the pile grew, there was no place left to set foot in the room.

He got caught with the final dress, in a rather ridiculous manner, because he no longer cared to play it safe. He managed to evade the night guard, ran to the pier on Rakovska Street, but one of them called out after him, and it so happened that two drunken agents were just passing by. With his huge key ring and a silk dress folded up under his coat, there was no way he could twist the truth. And all of a sudden he felt that the whole world, along with himself, had become infinitely distant to him. He stayed that way in custody too. The guards on duty tried to speak with him, but he answered briefly and wearily in a stranger's voice.

During the interrogations with the investigator, Angel Slavov, he reluctantly confessed to everything, as if he didn't care whether he would be released in a week or given a life sentence. That is until the guard on duty came on the third day and told him he had a visitor. It could not be! Or... Maybe she heard it from someone... No, it couldn't be. It must be someone from his village.

It was not anyone from his village. It was her. Adela. And she wasn't made out of air. And her coat was neither expensive nor new. He had never seen her in winter. She stood opposite him, tucked away in the deep blue of her coat, and only her clasped hands with her delicate fingers were real. Her face and eyes smiled as if out of some other time, and Ramadan could not tell whether that time was the past or the future.





# T

## TENEV, Georgi

Georgi Tenev is a writer, playwright and publicist. His fiction has been published in English, Spanish, German, Polish, Czech and Farsi, with theatrical plays translated into Russian, French, German. Tenev penned the award-winning novel *Party Headquarters*. His recent novel *Balkan Ritual* (2019) was shortlisted for the most prestigious Bulgarian literary awards: the Elias Canetti Literature Prize, Helikon Best Fiction Award and the Novel of the Year Award, while his newest book *The Residence* (2020) was shortlisted for Novel of the Year 2021. Tenev writes and co-writes feature film and documentary scripts composed in a range of genres and styles. His third book of poetry will appear in 2022, published by Small Station Press.

## THE RESIDENCE

### SUMMARY



The end of the 21st century, the nation is split in two—the Mountain Republic and the Free Zone. In a world of prohibitions and repression, only the mystical teachings of the Rila School have managed to capture young people’s hearts and minds. Persecuting and stamping out this sect is the Supreme Prosecutor’s task. The Ministry of Consequences considers the Rila School a dangerous cult.

The Prosecutor’s family is in crisis. To appease his wife, the Prosecutor gets a young man out of jail—he is brought to the official prosecutorial residence to take up the place left by the family’s missing son. The Prosecutor keeps close watch on the young man, waiting to see when he will take advantage of the opportunity to escape. The goal is to

turn the young man into an unwitting informer and to discover information about the legendary founder of the sect, the Teacher. Once he sneaks out of the residence, the young man heads towards the Rila Mountains. He reaches the Waterfall, a place where the Teacher used to meet his students. Using the waterfall as a secret passageway, he slips through into the wild, untamed part of the mountains.

At the same time, the Prosecutor is called away on a business trip and passes through the “membrane,” which separates the territories of the Mountain Republic and the Free Zone. One world is privileged, while the other is subordinate, deprived of the free exchange of ideas and information. This dualistic state is led by a female ruler of advanced age, the Instructor. She has chosen the Prosecutor to be the system’s next leader. The Instructor reveals the logic behind the divided nation: there is no other way to save resources and to mobilize some of the people to accept a more humble and limited standard of living. The division suppresses class strife and would-be revolutions.

The Prosecutor is expected to take on this new role once the Instructor retires, but he is hesitant. Until that moment he has conscientiously carried out his duties, but now the responsibility has become far more personal.

On the other side of the “membrane,” the young man wanders through the places that have become sacred for the Rila School. In memories, visions and an illusory reality, he makes contact with surviving followers of the teachings. These people defend their freedom and reaffirm their loyalty to the Rila School. The young man is given the mission of guarding “The Pages of Solace”—priceless notes from the students’ meetings with the Teacher.

Novel, 273 pages

ISBN: 9786197517088

Colibri Publishers, 2020

## EXCERPT

*Translated by Angela Rodel*

“I’ll tell you what happened to you, Luka... I’ll remind you of when and where you started changing, when you started becoming unsuited to life in the city and among people.”

The young man heard this voice like an echo as he slowly guided the car out of the neighborhood filled with official residences. He was leaving the isolated town with the homes of high-ranking government functionaries, crossing an invisible and physical border. He was driving across the bridge over the dry concrete-lined ravines towards the boulevard that led to the ring road.

“Yes, Luca... I will remind you and you yourself will remember.”

The name Luka filtered through like blurry light piled up on the arrestee’s eyelids, in the beginning only as sound. Luka was not a full name, but only part of a name, a part of some whole. The two syllables lu-ka were an excerpt from something larger, from the surname Lukanov?

He was leaving the serpentine twists of the city. The blinking light sensors on the corners of the car steered the automobile along the empty lane on their own. The steering wheel shuddered in his hands from time to time, as if checking whether the direction remained the same. The buildings fell away, sun barged in from the left—so he was heading south. Then the scaffold bridge smoothly curved to the right, the sun shifted and stopped shining in his eyes. The evenly pruned trees cast elongated shadows, the light and the gray shaded islands alternated. Beneath the front windshield there was small Bakelite window, behind which the phosphorescent

features of the clock displayed four numbers, one, zero, one, seven. Ten-seventeen, but he couldn’t guess the day of the week. Sparse lines of small white cars were strung along the highway in both directions, like child’s toys powered by some invisible hand. Each one of the cars carried completely different people, complete strangers to one another, separate, unfamiliar and mutually untouchable. Only the special information screen in the prosecutor’s company car could immediately provide information about which license plate belonged to which owner. If he had known how to use the device, the arrestee would have realized that woodworkers were travelling in the nearest car, on their way to some job. Further ahead, several masons had piled into a greyish truck on their way back from the small satellite cities. He passed a car with a retired military man who was on his way to deliver a handmade cradle to his children, a gift for his newborn grandson. The women from the dairy-milking farms were going to their seasonal jobs. In just one day, the flocks of sheep would be transferred to the grazing factories, and they would need experienced milkers who would take turns on shift after shift until they were exhausted. A dealer in hair for wigs, a buyer of female braids, he was also on the road, having stuffed his wares in the trunk of his pick-up. A van with woodcutters was on its way towards the felling area.

Don’t you know, dear mother...

Folksingers from the Woodpecker Choir swayed and dozed on the hard seats of their bus. They had set off at dawn for the very opposite side of the district. The road through the mountains had hypnotized them with its twists and turns and now the women were snoozing in the warm light of the late-morning sun. and who knows why, but in the choristers’ sleeping heads as if by telepathy the same verse of the old song “Don’t You Know, Mother Dear” filtered in. This Scythian-Macedonian motif was drawling, the three-part harmony evoked irresistible melancholy. They hadn’t sung it for decades.

Don’t you know, dear mother,  
why I am so wretched  
you keep me from my friends,  
I don’t dare go out in the yard  
you keep me from the mountain  
yet she is the one I am yearning for

“Don’t You Know, Dear Mother” was one of those folksongs that was unofficially banned. It had disappeared from choral songbooks and no longer showed up in concert programs. Somewhere in the Heritage Register it had been given a “no” stamp. The procedure thereafter was simple, the Eighth Principle for the Precautionary

Reduction of Influence was applied: non-repetition, which leads to non-remembrance with goal of termination.” Unheard, the echo of the song now swirled in the bus’s wake. The roadside eavesdropping antennas picked up conversations from the cars, registered key words given by the Ministry of Consequences and the House of Truth, but not the songs from the dreams of those stout village women. In the same way, the thoughts in Lukanov’s head also remained elusive. The young man in the prosecutorial car did not take his hands from the wheel, even though he did not yet need to steer. The driving was semi-automatic, the light sensors followed the dotted line on the guardrails. At the third exit he chose the only offramp without signage. There was no indication where the asphalt track led, but Lukanov turned the wheel without hesitation and the machine accepted his hands’ command.

The car took the left exit and headed up a hill. The highway receded to the right and gradually disappeared behind a concrete wall. The municipal road continued on its lonesome between the hills, it narrowed and the paving got rough. The wheels were jumping. The mountain grew and gradually edged closer. Back in the day, when the arrestee had found himself here for the first time—when he was not yet arrestee Lu-11/5, but a free young man who was silently undertaking the ascent towards the forbidden zone of Rila—the dirt road had been littered with smashed tree bark and fallen branches. The dead vegetation had unfurled a comfortable carpet. As the ascent continued, the blotchy skin of the forest changed color and texture. The yellow leaves of the beech, the fiery maple leaves, the braids of the Kermes oaks—all of that softness was replaced by pine needles; oaks and ash trees gave way to firs, mountain yews and spruce. And just like that, higher and higher, the road wound around, soft and comfortable for hiking, for turning the pedals of a bicycle. It was fenced off by the roadside anthills, moss and creeping vines of old man’s beard, various forms of vegetation, alive, then wilting, turning into clothes for the earth. They were yarn for knitting, veins and branches, leafy reeds, woody fibres. A flesh-like cloth, ground into dust by the wind and rain. The plants’ legacy formed the softy, crunchy terrain, the forest sand... Now all of that had disappeared, reduced to dark forest mud baked in the sun. Lots of rain had fallen in the mountains. Before the landscape had not been pockmarked with craters, jutting roots and bare rocky ridges. Through his squinting gaze the place was both the same yet brutally changed. And what was that?—like the tail of a gray fox lying by the roadside, enormous with fur standing on end, something with a jagged form, with metallic-silver edges came into view. This strange shape grew, the car drew near to something alien to the forest landscape. But it wasn’t just one thing, but many. In the middle of the woods there were traces of human habitation. Refrigerated trucks

were stopped in an uneven column by the side of the road. Not really lined up, but rather they had pulled over so as not to block traffic on the road. The arrestee let up on the gas. The car came to a stop, with a slight vibration the steering wheel turned and the motor went silent. What were these refrigerated trucks doing here? What was the gendarmerie planning? Only the militarized detachments and blockade militia could call up so many trucks, could take them out of the flat lands and bring them here. The arrestee peered at them, expecting to see movement amidst the vehicles. He could see the license plates on the hoods of the closest trucks. The square signs in the front windshields showed various abbreviations, registrations in far off provinces. What had the government forces done here and when? Lukanov got out of the car, leaving the door open.

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Not everything can be explained to everyone. Not everything is subject to explanation. You’ve been wandering in the forest now, looking for the way back, the echo of the recollection calls to you. To recreate the pathway to the past, you have to stumble upon passes in your memory. That’s what you are doing now, you are finding a way, feeling your way, giving shape to your recollection. I know what you are looking for, but I’m not going to hand it to you on a silver platter. I speak to you, but I would prefer for you not to hear me, it’s better for you that way. My voice will not help you, it can only hurt you. Knowing about me is dangerous, if you suspected that I was watching you and following your every move, that would be discouraging. Better for you to believe in your solitude. And to manage on your own. I will always be here.

Now—for those of you who are watching. You know that the battle between right and wrong has long since been lost. The battle between truth and lies remains. But not everything that is not a lie is the truth. It is not always the case that when a person does not tell lies that he speaks the truth. Speech has the ability to be disorganized. The truth, however, is that form of speech that is as organized as possible, that expresses one or another type of reality. It will take time for you to make sense of that, there’s no need to overwhelm you now. Here are the facts:

“The pogrom of 2040 began not due to ideological reasons, but on biopolitical grounds. The closing of the church, its persecution commenced with spontaneous attacks. After that it became institutionalized. Then it was adopted everywhere on the national level when, for the outbreak of the Romanian flu, a clear explanation was found, with an accusation and with the accused. The spread of the disease, they said, was facilitated by prayer meetings. Angry voices did not want formal trials, but revenge and direct retribution. They insisted on bringing the hammer down. Later,

when judicial hearings were held, investigators wrote up indictments and gave them to the court. Religious groups were banned. For many, mid-century was the time when the state needed to finally free itself from that burden.”

The events were described with these words in the official encyclopedia, in the abridged Handbook for Instruction.

My signature stood beneath the permission to include this information in the Handbook. I approve of history, but I encourage neither its repetition, nor its use as a model. What has happened should not be denied, but the need to transmit it must take into consideration the more important goal. And that is creation of a correct opinion about the world. This is what I concern myself with, this is my job. I instruct.

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The young man walked away from the car, heading towards the stopped trucks. Under his feet, pebbles crunched, the tiny stones excavated from the soil, washed clean by the rushing mountain streams, now dried and turned to gravel. He didn't notice that he was barefoot. The rocks were warm, warmer than the padded flooring of the prosecutorial care. Lukanov passed by the empty trucks and trailers. The gendarmerie had mobilized refrigerated trucks from all sorts of places, vans for transporting fish and frozen grain for seedlings, for foodstuffs and for delivering industrial ice to the chemical plant in Vratsa. There were butchers' trailers and refrigerators for milk. They were silent now, their doors closed, their cabs empty. Behind the windshields, in the drivers' seats, there was no one.

The sun had risen even higher. It was far from its zenith, but its rays already burned. Lukanov felt the light with his whole body. The warmed bark of the trees gave off a scent of sap and honey, a blaze of wood-dust burst out here and there amidst the bright, glowing colors of the branches. Mountain flies traced the burning tunnels of the sunbeams, passing through like fireworks and comets. A pipit was swooping down and back up, with a fly or a woodland butterfly in its beak. The sun sliced a broad, gleaming knife through the ridge of spruce. Light rays drummed down like rain on the metal of the cars, those foreign objects amidst the forest. The sides of the nearest truck were covered in stainless sheet metal. Parked at just the right angle, it reflected the sun. After a few more steps, the young man's eyes were directly facing the light. A huge murky mirror, rippling and silvery as mercury, detonated the reflected rays. The liberated arrestee soaked up the light with his face, he let it warm him, almost melt him. He could feel the sun fixing him to the spot, something inside him was boiling along with the greasy spots on his skin left from

the investigative procedures, from slathering him with electrolytes meant to ensure a good fit of the electrical wires during interrogation, from the sterile liquid they used to hose down the front of his body, the back and from the waist down, after he had rolled around on the dirty cement after the pulsing shocks that interrupted his muscles. Little craters dotted his body, invisible dots of sticky disinfectant. They had scrubbed the skin to unstick the papery layers left from scraps of adult diapers. They had wrapped them around his crotch to soak up the urine during the involuntary emptying of his bladder after every electroshock. Everything now evaporated from him as if via a specific photochemical formula. Lukanov stood there for at least ten minutes, without moving, until this magical radiation was gone. The sun had moved, the reflection had shifted. The projection changed its axis, the vector of the light ray was now pointed elsewhere, somewhere off to the side. Lukanov had left the eye of this sun storm, he was like a moon leaving his place after a solar eclipse, outside of the installation he had taken part in. He could open his eyes again. The brightness from a moment ago had gifted him with new sight, it had allowed him to look under his eyelids as well, to see himself through his own absence. Now, getting used to normal light, he saw the truck in front of him. He could read the signage, the letters and numbers on the refrigerator compartment. He could reach out his hand and pull open the door. And then remembering crashed over him. These were not trucks prepared for some police operation. These were refrigerators left over after the raid, after the young people were ousted from Rila. He had heard about it, he knew it had happened. He could see himself as well, he could feel his hands just as they had been during his first clash with the gendarmerie.

“For you young people, the task is to unmask the lie. That's what you think, right? And if you, the youth, speak the truth, it means that we are lying.”

The cop was short but husky, neat and tidy in his dark plainclothes suit. The boy in shorts with a backpack, sitting astride a bike, was looking at him from the corner of his eyes, refusing to turn his face fully towards him. And he stuttered slightly:

“I'm not saying anything, I don't know you.”

The boy is fourteen. It is him, Borislav Lukanov, the year is 2096.

“I don't know you,” Borislav says again.

He is afraid that the officer from the House of Truth will swing his brass baton. Springs are sticking out of the end of the baton at an angle, from which the treacherous sparks will fly if needed. It had been put to use just a minute earlier. The dog that the young people had taken with them was lying on the ground, spit trickled from its open mouth and its tongue was blue. One girl tried to hide her tears and stroked the gray shepherd dog's head.

“You know me! You know me, without ever having seen me.”

The officer makes a call on his walkie-talkie. The patrol will come and round them up. The dog will be left lying there, twitching on the dirty paved square in front of the yellowing columns of the waiting room. They had caught them at the train station in Nemirovo, right as they got off the train.

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#### **THERE IS TRUTH IN RILA.**

They found this slogan in one of the backpacks. They called it a leaflet and declared the young people an organized conspiratorial group. At first they took them all to the police station in the town of Chilingirovo. Something like interim arrest, while waiting for the investigators from the capital to arrive. Since they had found the leaflets and conspiratorial writings, an investigative official from the judicial ministry had to be called in. The authorities had eavesdropped on them. The controllers from the House of Truth knew far more about the young people’s organization than the boys and girls themselves did. And there had been some kind of organization, albeit spontaneous, not planned. Borislav had expected them to ask him who the others were, he assumed they would want him to confess to something, but that wasn’t exactly what happened. The investigators knew what they wanted. They were interested in the young people themselves, in these semi-adults. They decided their fate.

THERE IS TRUTH IN RILA—they didn’t spend much time interrogating them about what they meant by this, who had written it, why it was scribbled on the insides of the backpacks, on a hidden place under the visor of a baseball cap. THERE IS TRUTH IN RILA, but what truth exactly—it didn’t matter. The investigator made short work of decoding the mysterious slogan. He declared it to be an exhortation for the destruction of territorial restrictions. In the mountains there was a forbidden zone and the young people had made an attempt to invade this zone. Charges could be brought up on various grounds, including for “verbal calls for the criminal violation of the restricted regime.” Borislav did not understand whether something else would follow, whether he had to sign a confession or some kind of declaration, in which he would promise that this would never happen again. Would he get off just with that? They didn’t give him anything to write or sign. At that time they already avoided giving young people direct contact with paper and writing utensils, they forbade access to copy machines or mimeographs, they kept them far away from any printed materials. At the stationery warehouses they regarded any unfamiliar young people with suspicion and sold them goods only if

they could show an official certificate from their employer.

Lukanov waited in the holding cell and looked towards the window, which was covered in sheet metal. A slender stream of sunlight slipped through a hole that looked as if punched by a nail. The other source of light was the barred door, the only exit from the narrow cell. It led to the hallway, from whence came unpleasant sounds, dust, and from time to time the echo of voices. At the far end to the right were stairs, and in front of them, the little booth for the police on guard. Across the hallway he could see more bars, beyond which was another holding cell. At the end of the first night, a light bulb blinked on there, footsteps could be heard and they led someone in. In the morning, the young man realized that they had also arrested the girl with the reddish-brown hair and pale lips. He had seen her the day before on the train, but didn’t know who she was, she hadn’t been part of his group of friends. Now she was sitting on her knees and dozing off, leaning against the wall. Surely she was too disgusted to lie down on the shiny cot with its rumpled, stained mattress, which had hay sticking out of its threadbare corners.

For Borislav, the most important event during his arrest was that he discovered this girl.

## Translator Biographies

**Gergana Galabova** graduated English with Creative Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London, and is now a Master's student in the Translator-Editor programme at Sofia University. Her work has been published in literary newspapers *Literary Journal* and *Evolution*. In 2021 she won the Grand Prize at the 43rd National Student Literary Competition Boyan Penev.

**Velina Minkoff** has a degree in English from UCLA and is a graduate of the École de Traduction Littéraire (ETL) at the French National Book Center (CNL). A participant and faculty in the Translation Atelier of the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation, resident translator at Open Letter Books in Rochester, NY, auditrice libre in the Master de Traduction littéraire at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, she is a member of the Union of Bulgarian Translators and the Association des traducteurs littéraires de France (ATLF). She is currently working on a PhD in Bulgarian literary translation at the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Cultures (INALCO). In 2021, she was a Next Page Foundation resident translator at the House for Literature and Translation in Sofia, where she worked with Alek Popov on the English language translation of his novel *The Palaveev Sisters in the Storm of History* (Ciela, 2013).

**Ekaterina Petrova** is a literary translator and nonfiction writer. She holds an MFA in Literary Translation from the University of Iowa, where she was awarded the Iowa Arts Fellowship and helped edit *Exchanges: Journal of Literary Translation*. Her work has appeared in *Asymptote*, *Words Without Borders*, *The Southern Review*, *91st Meridian*, *European Literature Network*, and elsewhere. Her translation-in-progress of Iana Boukova's novel *Traveling in the Direction of the Shadow* received a 2021 PEN/Heim Translation Fund Grant. She has also received fellowships from ART OMI, the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation, and the TRADUKI literature network.

**Angela Rodel** is a literary translator who holds degrees from Yale and UCLA. Her translations have appeared in *McSweeney's*, *Two Lines*, *Ploughshares*, *Words Without Borders*, etc. She has received NEA and PEN translation grants; seven novels in her translation have been published in the US and UK. Her translation of Georgi Gospodinov's *Physics of Sorrow* won the 2016 AATSEEL Prize for Literary Translation, and was shortlisted for the 2016 PEN Translation Prize and ALTA's 2016 Translation Award. Her translation of four novellas by Georgi Markov will come out from Penguin Random House in 2022, while her translation of Georgi Gospodinov's novel *Time Shelter* will be published by Liveright in 2022.

**Traci Speed** is an American from Alabama who began studying Bulgarian from an old library textbook after spending a wonderful month in Bulgaria in 1990. At that point she had been studying Russian for some time, but she discovered that she preferred both the Bulgarian language and Bulgaria itself. After many detours, she ended up at the University of California, Berkeley, where she earned a PhD in Slavic Linguistics. She also became involved in the very lively Balkan music and dance community in Berkeley, and she still takes part in Bulgarian folk dancing whenever she has the chance. In 2017, she went to Shumen, Bulgaria, on a Fulbright research grant, and she now lives in Sofia, where she teaches translation at Sofia University.

**Desislava Toncheva** works as a translator and senior editor in the English Service Department of the Bulgarian News Agency (BTA). She is also a clinical psychologist with her own psychotherapy practice on the side. In fact, she discovered her passion for translation when she was studying to be a therapist and helped out with translating lectures by foreign trainers, which inspired her to get her MA in Translation and Editing. She still often translates psychology-related events. Toncheva feels that both of her career paths complement each other perfectly, as in essence both are about the support of understanding and communication.

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