

**Contemporary**  
**Bulgarian Prose 2023**  
*Ten Books from Bulgaria*

**Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2023: *Ten Books from Bulgaria***

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**Contemporary  
Bulgarian Prose  
2023**

*Ten Books  
from Bulgaria*



NATIONAL  
PALACE OF CULTURE  
CONGRESS CENTRE  
SOFIA



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 Strategic Development, 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 programs: 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 a 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).









# Elena *ALEXIEVA*

## *Vulcan*

Elena Alexieva writes short stories, novels and plays. She is the author of the short story collections *Readers' Group 31*, *Who*, and *The Breaking of Samsara*, while her novels include *Night, Devil and Death*, and *The Nobel Laureate*, among others. As a playwright, she has received the national Askeer and Ikar Awards for new Bulgarian drama. Her plays have been collected in two volumes, *Angel Fire* and *Victims of Love*. She has also won the Helikon Prize for contemporary Bulgarian fiction, the Quill Prize (twice), in addition to many other awards, while her novel *Saint Wolf* was named Novel of the Year for 2019. Her latest book is yet another novel, *Vulcan* (2023). Her books have been translated into French, Spanish, Russian, Macedonian and Arabic.

Elena lives in Sofia, Bulgaria, and works as a freelance interpreter. She is also the Bulgarian translator of William Faulkner's *The Wishing Tree* and *The Wild Palms*.

## Synopsis

*Vulcan* is a novel of multiple storylines coming together to build an image of Bulgaria's surrealist and fantastic present, from within and from without. Ultimately, it is also a dream seen by Klaus Schimmelhoff, a demented former pop-art celebrity with Alzheimer's, now mostly forgotten and living in his penthouse studio with his Bulgarian nurse, Magda.

Many years ago, Magda left her home country for Germany to seek her fortune as a prostitute. Trying to make the kind of money she could never make in Bulgaria was her excuse to leave behind a baby daughter, Milena, in the care of her grandparents. Milena was born with a genetic disorder: her entire body is covered with hair. Milena grows up in a village behind closed doors, vaguely remembering her mother and in dire need of the father she has never known. When her grandmother dies, she leaves for good. In her mind, she sees herself as the Monkey Queen and the daughter of an underground '90s punk performer and poet, Satan Pirdopski. Hitchhiking to the capital city of Sofia, she gets a ride from Koki, an elderly businessman and man of the world, who takes her in the opposite direction, to Stara Zagora, where he has to meet his longtime friend and wealthy entrepreneur Dunyo. The two are cooking up the deal of their lives: a thermal power plant has to be re-equipped with costly new technology to meet the EU's latest CO2 capture requirements. Koki comes up with a brilliant idea: why not make it run on shit? It is cheap, available, environmentally friendly and will make them the biggest power generators and exporters across the EU.

On the way back, Koki and Milena have an accident on a dirt road in the middle of the night. Milena slips away, leaving Koki behind. Crawling on all fours through a dark wood, Koki finds an ancient fig tree and stops to rest. Exhausted and scared, he is overwhelmed by a vision of the Luminous Void, where he floats freely, forgetful of everything, and comes to the realization that his mission from now on should be to help every living thing in the world out of its misery and suffering, starting with Milena. Meanwhile, he is visited by a Rastafarian-looking demon, Mara, who tries to talk him out of his ideas, using all sorts of dirty tricks, even appearing in the guise of Koki's beloved wife, Amalia. Koki is distraught but resists. In the morning, he finds his way out of the woods and starts his long walk to Sofia, Buddhist-monk style. He desperately needs to find Milena and give her the happy future she deserves.

Veneta, a journalist on a mission to find Dr. Tzerovski—the surgeon who many years ago did the first gender reassignment surgery in Bulgaria—discovers

him in an isolated home for the mentally disturbed on the country's southern border. Contrary to her information, he is not the head doctor there, but a patient. This is Veneta's first fully independent assignment, and she has to write her article no matter what. She finds the doctor tied to a bed in a filthy, piss-soaked room, totally detached from the world around him. Now secluded within himself, Tzerovski had once been a highly controversial figure, a brilliant surgeon in a provincial hospital, an alcoholic and a dreamer who saw his groundbreaking operation as a way to promote happiness for all. However, he ends up ostracized by the medical community and the public at large, with his license revoked, his life ruined, his sanity gone.

His first and last gender reassignment patient was Satan. Following the collapse of communism and the onset of a wild, primitive capitalism, the singer has lost his iconic status on the underground scene, and with nowhere to perform, broken, alone and with no particular prospects, he returns to his small hometown to live again with his aging parents on the verge of poverty. Chalga has come to replace punk, now dead and gone along with communism itself. One night, trying to find a job in his old club, now a chalga discotheque, Satan meets Dr. Tzerovski and after a drinking spree he decides to change his gender.

This encounter gives birth to Aphrodite—now a middle-aged, self-taught clairvoyant with a successful career and a list of VIP clients, one of whom is Dunyo, Koki's rich and powerful friend. Dunyo visits Aphrodite to inquire after his pal who has completely fallen off the radar. The big deal is moving forward, the project is growing, and the stakes are higher than he can afford. But above all, he misses his soulmate. Aphrodite sends him away. Before he finds Koki, he has to bring someone special to her. This someone is Dr. Tzerovski. Knowing where he is and that she is unable to save him on her own, she needs Dunyo's contacts in order to take the doctor under her wing and repay her old debt.

Meanwhile, Milena is in Sofia, selling veggies in an open-air market. She has found a new life that she enjoys. Sleeping under the stars on the hot summer nights, attracting customers from near and far with her strange appearance, she basks in her newly found power over those she had been kept away from all her life. For a while, Milena has stopped looking for her father, until one day she meets a one-legged man she decides to follow to the long-abandoned inn outside Sofia where he lives. Could that be him, Satan?

Koki, too, is in Sofia. Living on the streets, eating out of dumpsters, he is now just an old beggar and a hermit in the middle of the big city. There he meets Jesus, a young gypsy boy, who believes that he owns the place and that everyone

works for him. As Koki befriends him, he realizes that the boy has potential. Wild, reckless and unforgiving as he is, with his father in prison and his mother away, Jesus holds the key to the future—and also to Milena, as it turns out.

One day Dunyo comes to Sofia to negotiate the project for the shit-pipe with the prime minister. The prime minister is in awe and promises all sorts of investment and support. Elated with the outcome of the meeting, Dunyo comes out of the prime minister's office to find his long-lost friend, barely recognizable, begging on the stairs out front. Dunyo takes Koki with him. They still have business to take care of.

Having left the one-legged man behind, Milena spends her days going up and down the main road to Sofia, stealing food and thinking. This is how Dunyo, Koki and Jesus find her on their way to saving Dr. Tzerovski from the mental asylum. To take him to Aphrodite, they have to kidnap him. While waiting for them, the clairvoyant finds out that a Chinese astronomer has discovered the lost planet Vulcan, whose unproved existence she has always believed in. Vulcan is the planet of Virgo, and according to Aphrodite's own calculations, Virgo is the sign of the newly born Bulgaria. Once Vulcan gets discovered, everything will change for the better.

But families cannot be cobbled together from nothing. Eventually, longing for his lost freedom in the mental asylum, Tzerovski hits the road, never to come back. So does Milena. Now that she has grown up to fully accept herself as the animal girl that she is, she too runs away to freedom. Aphrodite is left alone in her garden with the invisible Vulcan shining above.

In the middle of nowhere a new, revolutionary project is about to launch. The world has gathered to celebrate it: EU commissioners, MEPs, ambassadors and the entire political elite of the country. Koki and Dunyo are there too, awaiting the birth of their own brain-child, the shit pipe. From here, it will grow to cover the world, bringing shit to Bulgaria, selling cheap power in return. Bulgaria will once again be restored to its former historical glory. At the end of the ceremony, Koki and Dunyo decide to walk back. Where to? They don't know. The road takes them to the mental asylum—the only place in sight where they can hope to spend the night.

EXCERPT FROM

## *Vulcan*

by Elena Alexieva

*Translated by Elena Alexieva*

The Imperial Blue had merged with the night, or rather, the night had consumed it, leaving behind just a blurry spot of condensed darkness. Koki could not think of another such night in his life. He had heard, for example, of the cosmic darkness of the Amazon rainforest, but could never believe it was possible in the forests around Vakarel, Ihtiman, or wherever else he was supposed to be at the moment. Although his mind was not exactly clear, he had heard the girl slip out of the car, but had no way of calling her. She must still be nearby, scared, probably injured. It was his duty to find her, give her first aid if she needed it, except the airbag had gotten stuck, leaving Koki gasping for breath. His fingers grasped the lever on the side of the seat, though it made no sense—he knew it could go no further. He thought the airbag had not just failed to deflate, but was actually continuing to inflate. Now he was sure to pass out. And suddenly it came to him in a flash. He pushed himself against the airbag as hard as he could. His chest almost collapsed from the pressure. He thought he could hear his ribs breaking. At last, his fingers reached the ignition key. Luckily, it wasn't stuck. Koki switched off the engine, pulled the key out, and plunged it into the airbag.

He rolled out onto the dry, warm ground, groping his way on all fours. His lungs wheezed and his diaphragm hurt. His legs were swollen. One of his sneakers had slipped off in the car. Other more serious damage he could not detect. The Imperial Blue very well might not burst into flames, but Koki crawled further away, just in case. He banged into tree trunks, got entangled in thickets, invisible thorns tore his fine shirt and pierced his skin, somewhere along the way his sock slipped off too. Lost in the noise of his own escape, the sounds of the forest failed to reach him. At one point the trunks grew sparser. Koki tried to stand up but

his body would not listen. It had long since given up. Even on all fours he could not hope to go much further. Suddenly, crawling became easier. It seemed there was nothing ahead of him. Koki moved a little bit further. The air smelled of dry leaves, roots and dirt. Koki began to swallow it greedily, his mouth gaping and his tongue hanging out. Long ago, when he was a kid, he loved standing like this under icicles, catching the cold springy droplets. They slid down his throat, filling him with the boundless joy of a young animal. Back then, he didn't see anything down the road either; he just knew there was something big and exciting, all his own, and was in a hurry to grow up. But here again, he banged into the impenetrable darkness, which now, hard and rough, fiercely grazed his bald head. Koki cursed and instinctively curled up like a hedgehog. After a while, when the pain receded, he dared to reach out and touch it. It was a tree trunk. He dragged himself up, leaned against it and fell silent. His strength was all gone. All he could do was wait for the dawn. Sleep a bit, if anything. He remembered the girl again. It wasn't right to leave her like that, the accident was his fault, after all. Then he said to himself that there was nothing he could do in this regretful state. Besides, she was the one who had left him. And then he thought of Amalia, waiting for him to get home, of his older daughter, of his son, of Kalina... Who was still just a child! Koki pulled himself together and quietly called: "Milena... Milena..."

Somewhere close, an owl called back. At first its cry sounded like a human moan, and he called again, but this time the owl didn't answer. Koki closed his eyes. No, he was not blind. On the contrary, he saw everything. Or at least he imagined that in his almost seventy years of age he had seen it all. Until this girl came his way, with her fur, her purple tracksuit, her curtain of hair... Like a wild thing. And Koki realized he hadn't seen anything. And he wanted to see from now on.

He dozed off. He had somehow managed to prop his thick back against the hard trunk and had made himself almost comfortable. What time was it? How much longer till daybreak? He had left his phone in the car, and he was long out of the habit of wearing a wristwatch. And how would the phone help him if it was the first to go? Even Radio Baking Powder would have been nice...

He must have fallen asleep from exhaustion. He had a dream of the two of them, Amalia and himself, again at that Andrea Bocelli concert, but the famous tenor had disappeared and Koki had had to substitute for him. He was terrified, he wanted to flee, but the audience roared, the musicians from the orchestra tapped their music stands, and Amalia was pushing him towards the stage, mumbling all along: come on, come on, it's not a big deal. Koki tried to explain



that he couldn't, he wouldn't sing, that he was embarrassed and scared, although he knew all of Bocelli's arias, but when he turned to her, he saw it wasn't Amalia, it was Milena, and the hall was crowded with strangers, whom Koki nevertheless knew quite well, with Dunyo at the conductor's podium in his Armani jacket and his first-born by his side, all eyes on him, thousands of voices pleading: come on, come on, it's not a big deal...

Koki opened his eyes. Across from him a man was sitting cross-legged and looked as if he were munching on sunflower seeds, because now and then he would raise his hand to his mouth and spit. His teeth, small, pointed and white, flashed cheerfully, as though the man was a cartoon character. He wore a white Bob Marley T-shirt, his hair hung down in messy Rasta ropes, and at his feet there was a flashlight, which, when he saw that Koki was awake, the man put beneath his chin, making him even more fearsome. Koki was taken aback.

For a time, no one said anything. The man held the torch, grinning, rolling his eyes eerily, cracking seeds and spitting all the while, then apparently he had enough of it, because he turned the light towards Koki, blinding him quite deliberately.

"Shall I roll one for you? It'll do you good. I've got some really fine stuff. There's that guy nearby, he gave it to me."

"Thanks, but I don't smoke."

"Come on, I'm not gonna smoke it all alone. It's boring."

Koki shook his head. "Turn that light off, would you?"

The man grinned again, turned the flashlight up and looked inside, as if there was something really interesting there. He did so without so much as a blink.

"Light is a blessing. Haven't you heard? But if that's what you prefer..." And the flashlight went off. "I personally have no use for it. I can see just fine without it. I don't know about you, though."

"Who are you?"

The stranger pretended he had not heard. He was in a peculiar state of loquaciousness and seemed to perk up at his own words. "Frankly speaking, I did not image you like this. Don't take offense, but you're a bit old. Not to mention those extra pounds. How could you! I almost thought you were gone. And that car you wrecked! But the car is not a problem. The undercarriage is intact. As for the metal—I have some guys here who are really into it. They'll straighten it in no time, just like new. Well, it'll cost you, sure it will, but as far as I know, money's not a problem for you, right? What do you say? Shall I call them?"

Koki shook his head. "Thanks, but no. I'll be fine."

The man threw a handful of seeds in his mouth and started spitting like crazy. It cheered him up even more. “Okay, it’s up to you. But don’t thank me. I haven’t done anything for you yet.”

Somehow Koki could see him very distinctly, as if a full moon was shining above. He looked up. There was no moon in sight. “There was this girl with me... Have you seen her by chance? I am worried about...”

“Forget the girl!” the other guy interrupted briskly. “She’s alright. Besides, she is not my concern. Let her go.”

“But what are you... I...”

“You’d better think of yourself. Don’t you want to go home and forget about the whole thing? They must be worried sick there. Just say the word, and it can be arranged right away.”

“You don’t get it. This isn’t right. She is...” Koki struggled to find the word. He always did this in the States, where people were conditioned against letting slip something they were not supposed to. “...underprivileged. She was in my car, right? So she’s my responsibility.”

“Responsibility, my ass! And for this girl, out of all the...” Something crunched between his teeth, and he spat violently. “Isn’t everyone else enough for you? Or wait... I see! Why didn’t you come right out with it? With all the little girlies I can get you! Small ones, big ones, just name your poison! The little sweeties! If you want me to, I can get them even from kindergarten.”

Koki shuddered with indignation. “What do you... I shall not tolerate this! And who are you, after all? Where did you come from?”

The other man grinned again. “Call me Mara. In fact, call me whatever you like, I don’t care. I am a dealer by occupation. I deal in anything that comes to mind, just name it. I have no time to waste. The night is short and I have other clients to talk to.”

“What am I supposed to say?” Koki was confused.

“Anything—money, love, power, longevity... Everything along those lines.”

Koki contemplated the prospect for a while. The entrepreneur in him was still there. “I have all of that.”

The stranger was starting to lose patience. “Well, then enjoy it!”

“But if you tell me how to find the girl and help her...”

“I told you, she is not my concern. There’s nothing I can do about her.”

“And who would be your concern?”

Mara stretched out his hand. Koki thought it was full of sunflower seeds, but when he looked closer, he saw it was not seeds but tiny white pebbles.

“What are those?”

“Souls,” Mara said curtly, tossing another one into his mouth. “Human souls. The dead of the day. Your kind. Well, sometimes I might just make an exception.”

“And you eat them?”

“That’s my food. And my fate.” The other man offered a crooked smile and shook his head. The Rasta ropes stirred like snakes and crawled down his shoulders. “And a little bit of weed now and then. To cheer me up.”

Koki was astonished. He reached casually for the handful of pebbles, wanting to pick one up, to examine it from close up, but Mara withdrew his hand possessively.

“Don’t! It’s too early for you. Besides, you have your own.”

“And you?”

“I have everything and nothing. How can I explain? I told you I’m a dealer. I don’t own things—I just give them out. They only pass through me. But I am the king of giving out, in this I have no equal. Just like your friend’s baklava, which you stuffed yourself with so foolishly. It was his, but you were the one to eat it up, right? This is exactly what makes us so much alike. To me it’s pebbles, to you it’s baklava. But who can tell what this actually is?”

Koki was thoughtful. He definitely didn’t like the idea of having something in common with the sharp-toothed Rasta who never stopped chewing and increasingly reminded him of an odious greedy squirrel gorging himself on acorns.

“And what do you get from this?”

“A percentage. You know how it works. I own nothing but I get a cut of everything. And nothing can happen without me. Why do you keep asking? You have a far better grasp of this than me.”

Now Koki was definitely overwhelmed by the feeling that the man before him was totally insane. Insane and dangerous, because his insanity was based on a logic so obvious that Koki, being indeed all too familiar with it, had no way of refuting it. It was also his own logic, and the fact that the stranger had explained it in such clear and simple terms scared him even more.

“Have you by chance fled from some institution?”

“I might have. So what? Does this make me less real?”

Koki sighed. He was tired. Tired and lost. He didn’t feel like arguing. The other man’s arguments were irrefutable, and yet there was something rotten in them. Or maybe his very logic, his system was rotten. The leaves above him rustled. The owl called briefly, warningly, and fell silent again.

“Go away. I want to be alone.”

“Go away?” Mara chuckled. “Not gonna happen, my friend. Or colleague, rather. For your information, this forest is all mine. From the restitution, inheritance from my grandfather. And this tree you’re sitting under is mine as well. By the way, it’s almost completely dry, I should’ve had it cut down long ago. I know some guys nearby...”

“I thought you said you didn’t own a thing.”

“It was just a metaphor, a figure of speech. Words are imperfect. They seem to express things, but in fact only pass by them like water. This is their strength—that they come and go without touching the essence. They only diagnose things, if you wish. And that’s all. Truth is inexpressible. But then, what do we care? We are concrete people, all about business. Being active, bargaining, making deals—that’s our element. It’s what gives us pleasure! And you want to be alone... How am I stopping you? You are alone, you always have been. How do you know that everything there has not been a mere hallucination? That I am not you? That you are not bargaining against yourself?”

“I don’t. I just want to...”

“There!” Mara slapped his thigh, and the snakes on his head stirred again. “We’ve come to what you want! That’s my boy! And just so you know, I won’t deny you anything. So long as it is within my range, of course, which is quite broad. You’re not into peanuts, that much is clear. Sorry, I misjudged you. It’s the global, the cosmic you are after. Okay, no problem. How about the Google Board, for example? Or the Amazon one? No? And social media? There’s power for you, power you’ve never even dreamt of! You’ll live nice and quiet in that bunker of yours on Sequoia Street and will run the world from there. You won’t have to move a finger; you’ll have people to do it for you. Or no! Perhaps you crave exotics? Something outright extraordinary? You’ve got it! I’ll sign you up for Musk’s team! An astronaut! Full speed into outer space! But you’ll have to lose some pounds first, get in shape. Don’t worry, I’ll help you with that too.”

Koki listened and, much against his will, was increasingly amused. The guy really was insane and although it was a mental condition, his insanity was strangely likable and familiar.

“How about the power plant? You haven’t said a thing...”

“What power plant? Oh, the shit-fired one! Come on, don’t play so small, it’s no fun. But then, if you want a power plant, so be it. And I’ll get the shit for you. I’ll deliver all the shit in the world right at your doorstep, just say so.”

“And how much will it cost?”

Now Mara, too, paused to think and even began to bend his fingers as if counting.

“How much, how much... Nothing. You’ll take your car tomorrow—my guys will fix it for you, it’ll be like new, you won’t recognize it—and go home. I don’t want you digging into this anymore. The rest is on me. Agreed? Let’s roll one to seal the deal, I’m dying for a smoke.”

“And the girl, Milena. What about her?”

Mara’s face darkened. He tossed a handful of pebbles into his mouth and started munching. His features grew distorted. And so did Bob Marley on his skinny chest.

“Fuck me! I keep talking and talking, and all he can think about is the girl... The girl this, the girl that... What do you care about her? Idiot! Your own girls are alright, okay? What more do you want?”

“It’s not about the girl,” Koki objected calmly. “That is, it is, and it isn’t. It’s just that all this suffering makes me sick. It won’t let go of me. How am I supposed to live like this?”

“Like you’ve lived so far—ignore it!”

“How can I ignore it, when she gets into my car and says: are you blind? And I must have been blind, there’s no other explanation.”

Mara was silent. He made to toss something into his mouth again but realized his hand was empty. He had run out of fuel. It made him sad.

“You haven’t been blind. You merely have been keeping your eyes on the road, like everyone else. What’s so bad about that? You won’t fix humankind. At most, you’ll hurt yourself. And why? To what end? Or worse. Had you been young, it would be alright to explain all this to you. But look at you... An old man. Why don’t you just relax and enjoy old age, sir? There, in the States. You’ll be pinching the Puerto Rican lady’s ass while she changes your nappy, your daughters will be running around trying to please you as best as they can... Pure bliss! The grandchildren will come, you will live on and multiply. What more do you want?”

Now it was Koki’s turn to be silent. The other guy was right, but he was also wrong. Koki was aware of Mara’s rightness, which was also his own. Had been his own. Up until this morning when the girl got in the car. What had changed since, other than the fact that he had narrowly survived and the Imperial Blue needed major repair? The change was, Koki replied to himself, that nothing was left of what had been there. He looked for it within himself but didn’t find it. Now he was filled with a luminous emptiness just like the airbag had been filled with

gas. And just like the airbag, he was stuck. But there was no one to puncture him and take him back to what had been. All that had been was gone. Nothing was left but the luminous emptiness. Mara was right when he said it could have been worse. Because after he punctured the airbag, turning it into a pitiable, good-for-nothing rag, it would never ever save anyone's life. Koki himself was in a similar situation: if he allowed Mara to ruin him with his irrefutable and completely reasonable arguments, to which he himself would have happily subscribed only yesterday, nothing would be left of the present Koki, not even a pitiable rag. He would never have what had been there. Had he not given it up voluntarily, although he could not say for sure at what point? It had happened deep down in the even more impenetrable darkness of his soul, in that region which wasn't even his because it belonged to the world soul. There was no rustling tree crown there, no urgent owl call, not even a trace of what he had been used to addressing as himself. His own will had dissolved into a powerful and alien will, which he experienced as emptiness and whose radiance blinded him just like the daylight blinds the unaccustomed eye of one who sees it for the first time. The awareness of this hurt him. He was sitting, helpless before the demon, like a small child, unsuspecting that he need only lift his finger and crush the flea crawling on him. And just like a child, he was crying.



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# B

# Radoslav *BIMBALOV*

## *Ecstasis*

Radoslav Bimbalov was born in 1973 in Plovdiv; he graduated the English Language School there and from the University of National and World Economy in Sofia. He works in mass communications, as well as social and charitable activity. For many years he has been a writer for *Manager*, *Diary* and other print and online periodicals. He is a frequent guest on national media platforms as an analyst of political-social issues, as well as a popular speaker at large conference events. He is among the founders of one of the most successful platforms for education in the sphere of mass communications, *Praktika*. He is the founder and director of the *Smarts* advertising agency.

His work with short literary formats led to the aphoristic blog, “A Bulgarian Citizens’ Itinerary” (2009), which gained serious online popularity. His short stories have appeared in the anthologies *On Leisurely Living and Enjoying Life* (Colibri 2020), *Firewalkers* (EuroChicago 2021), and *Love for Advanced Learners* (Colibri 2022). His debut novel *Me, the Maniac* (Hermes 1999), was ranked among Bulgaria’s bestsellers, but only after 23 years did he decide to publish a collection of stories *Shut Up* (Ciela 2022). His new novel *Ecstasis* appeared in 2023.

## Summary

With the publication last year of his short story collection *Shut Up*, the advertiser and public figure Radoslav Bimbalov has set out into the narrow streets of great literary endeavours and has immediately turned into one of the most talked-about figures in contemporary Bulgarian prose.

Now the writer's discerning pen has returned at full power, with the hypnotizing novel *Ecstasis*—compact beguiling prose, at the same time intimate and exquisite, but also merciless in its powerful insights into the contemporary world.

Mikhail is invisible. You can't see him or sense him. He comes *from the left*—a place memories where are kept, but feelings and names slowly fade. His task is to collect and nourish the last breath of dying people. But sometimes even *on the left*, something happens that will change the rules forever. What is it that can defeat death and even obstruct the creator? What is this space for breath, without which life would be impossible?

A triumph of the imagination and exquisite writing, *Ecstasis* testifies to the creative talent and the precise psychological insight with which Radoslav Bimbalov strips the human soul bare and reminds us of age-old values.

“I like books written with a flair for language. Books which lull you with the slight trace of the opium of storytelling, where there is no chance word and every line unlocks new doors and senses. At the point from which the invisible narrator—the harvester of final breaths—speaks, there is a meeting of death and love, melancholy and irony, fear and consolation. And a seductive personal story amongst the strangers' stories in the end. I haven't read such an exquisitely written book like *Ecstasis* by Radoslav Bimbalov in a long time.”

Georgi Gospodinov, author



EXCERPT FROM

## *Ecstasis*

by Radoslav Bimbalov

*Translated by Christopher Buxton*

**O**n the ground floor of the flaking three-story apartment building, hunched up next to the dark church, some white cherries were simmering stickily on the gas ring in the tiny kitchen. Whitish foam rose up to the top of the big burnt saucepan, exhaled and slid back down. The old woman in an apron popped in the slotted spoon and carefully stirred the thickening confection, and then wiped her hands on her substantial hips and moved to the sink. A pile of dishes awaited her and she set to scrubbing them with a soapy sponge.

I was stretched out on the kitchen work top, centimetres from the woman, who had no idea that I was visiting her. She was at that fairly advanced age when dexterity turns into jerky clumsiness. Her hands, having lost their elasticity and grip, dropped some things, but she never stopped bustling, as if she didn't have enough time left. Maybe that was it, I was with her after all.

The old woman took out a teaspoon, wiped it on her apron and shuffled her slippers back towards the gas ring. She pushed through the dome of bubbling foam and dug the tip of the spoon into the thick jam. She lifted it to eye level so she could inspect it, sniffed it and then blew on it gently to cool it down. She tilted the spoon and deposited a sticky drop on to the nail of her left thumb. She moved her thumb gently and observed the thick droplet—it just wavered lazily, but did not spill. Satisfied, the woman grunted and pulled the saucepan off the gas ring. She skimmed off the foam with the slotted spoon and then took a white cotton towel, carefully wrapped the saucepan and left the softened cherries to thicken. I admit, it got my juices going. I am sure that one time I had wolfed down a soft fat slice of bread, spread with melted butter and a generous pouring of jam, which penetrated the crust of the bread, sticking to my fingers and mouth. It sounds to me like a memory—so what if my tongue, true to *the left rule*, refuses

categorically to return whatever sense of the particular taste of the cooked white cherries?

Did I really feel hunger? *On the left* the need to eat does not exist. It's not even necessary to munch chocolate so as to stock yourself up with tryptophan—that amino acid that pours out serotonin. You know, the happiness hormone.

Happiness *on the left* is measureless and inexhaustible. Moreover, it occurs in an unrepeatably unexpected way, sometimes idiotically different from everything before. Since I've been *on the left*, I often spend my days riding the prickly branch of some pine tree, metres from the ground. I make myself a little aeroplane out of a piece of paper, I launch it with two fingers down into the ravine, and it catches the first gust of wind it meets, loops into a circle around the tops of the trees cascading down the steep gorge, and suddenly rises up and returns to me. I grab it and launch it again. And it's like this for hours on end, feeling an indescribable delight from the illogical lightness of a little aeroplane made from an empty page.

If I existed, if I wasn't *on the left*, the pine tree would have stuck needles into my bottom. Just that the body now plays no part, it doesn't mess with my feelings, doesn't get in the way of my awareness of leading a full life. It's another kind of life. I don't know if it is better, how can I compare? I hadn't slaved away a long time in that other, previous one.

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The flat was quite small. From the front door you entered a narrow corridor which led to a modest living room with a kitchenette added. There was a bedroom the size of a wardrobe and a miniature bathroom, where the shower dripped straight onto the toilet seat. The only window in the living room looked out at the heads of the passers-by, that's why the net curtain over the bottom half of the window never moved. A ground-floor flat. Somewhere, back in time, a long time before the old woman stewed white cherries, a porter had lived here perhaps.

When I came in the morning, the woman was just going out of the building—she stepped carefully over the shifting slabs on the path towards the church. She swayed in front of me, hunched up, in a long broad skirt, a bright silk short-sleeved blouse and a battered handbag over her shoulder. She'd brushed her wavy white hair and as a mark of eternal femininity, she'd delicately spread pale lipstick over her lips. I followed a few steps behind her. And there was no way she could have supported herself on my arm.

She made the sign of the cross three times as she entered the church, she lowered her head in prayer. She stopped in front of an icon with a huge frame of

exquisite golden ornamentation and stroked it with her dry, scrawny hand. She bent down and offered up her lips, her eyes closed, and then she pulled back and left me to stare at the painted disembodied female face and the unrealistically thin arms holding the baby with an adult face. In the icon there was something exhausted and doomed, a pain beyond the understanding of this world. But the old woman did not kiss it out of commiseration. When it comes to icons, little folk have specific expectations, an overwhelming hope, as though these lengthened painted people are capable of fulfilling every miracle asked of them. I fixed my eyes on the shrunken little being in the Madonna's lap. I couldn't find any resemblance with **nobody**, but pay no attention to me, I haven't seen him anyway.

The priest came out from behind the altar. He was young—his beard was still soft and fresh. The old woman bustled to kiss his hand, but he stopped her with hands on her shoulders.

"Father, can I ask about tomorrow..." The little old woman lifted her head up towards him.

"The memorial, yes... When did those forty days pass... Everything is arranged, don't worry," the priest reassured her as he took her arm and led her outside.

I left them on their own a little while. I'd spotted the shallow wooden tray with sand, down low. The flame melted the yellowy paraffin wax, hot droplets fell onto the sand, amongst the miniature forest of candles, sprouting there in honour of the beyond. This little candle will scarcely burn entirely. They'll throw it out, to make way for the next one. The tray like life—it doesn't have space for everyone.

A moment before going back to the flat, it was as if the necrologue on the entrance door pulled at my t-shirt. The old woman entered, and I fixed my eyes on the white paper with a black cross at the top. Under the sad news was her photograph—white wavy hair, the same exhausted smile. Her face on the necrologue. I needed some time to register what I had seen.

We were now in her kitchen. The old woman lit the gas ring with one strike of a match, boiled up some water, and poured a packet of wheat into it. She left it to simmer, and her eyes swam. She leant against the work surface, her head hanging down. She didn't move, in complete silence, she stared at the floor. I stayed at the other end of the room, making no effort to get closer. It was early yet.

"I'll stew the white cherries for you, sister. They'll all be for you," the woman whispered in the empty kitchen. "The wheat will be for the others."

When it boiled, she poured it onto a sheet on the couch in the kitchen to dry out. Then she sat beside it and wept huge tears, in silence. Not that she had anyone to hear her. Even I was not there officially.

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Imagine someday, you look at the mirror and there's nothing there. I know it sounds like a nightmare or a cheap horror film. The old woman from the ground floor beside the church had grown old with her twin sister beside her. I didn't know her sister had departed forty days earlier, and now that meant nothing. It was then I realized her obvious absence. Everything in the flat was in pairs—two toothbrushes, two towels, two beds. One stood fully made up with sheets carefully tucked in, as though the twin could come back any moment.

No, she couldn't, I knew that. She was now in the waiting room of the white void and was progressively forgetting everything, including her sister, who was hastily wrapping the white cherry jam she'd just taken off the gas ring. She left it to one side, beside the bowl with the mound of wheat, bewigged with caster sugar. Then she turned, took two painful steps and sat with difficulty on the small sofa under the window. Exhaustion settled beside her. The day was atypically long—she'd gone to the church to talk over everything to do with the memorial tomorrow, then she'd boiled the wheat, as well as the promised white cherries. Her eyelids hung over her cloudy aged eyes. Her head weighed so much that it drooped to one side and pulled her entire body onto the sofa. I saw how the woman lay down slowly, giving way to tiredness. She snored quietly, and I sat on the gutted armchair and lifted my eyes to the ceiling. The sad, yellowing chandelier with two missing cups would probably form my company till morning. Hello there, chandelier, I said to it. No reply. I expected nothing else.

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Not much time passed before I realized the old woman's snoring was getting louder. It was as if she were having more difficulty breathing, as if she were choking. I stepped over to her and sat on the sofa. I would have held her trembling hand if I were really there.

"Hello," the old woman suddenly wheezed, wide eyed, smiling broadly. I froze. No, this was not possible.

"Come, come..." the old woman continued speaking with an effort.

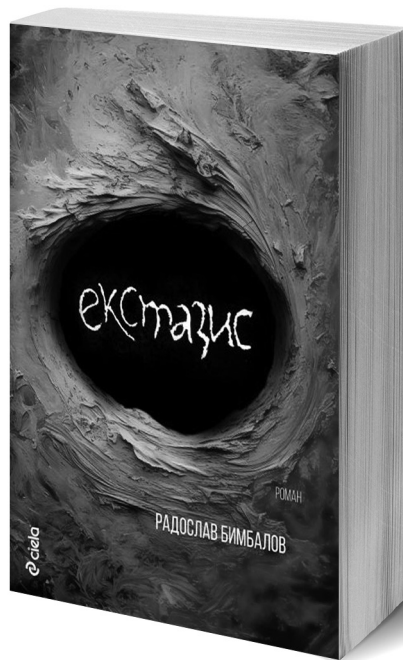
She was breathing with increasing difficulty, over a dry, choking cough. I straightened and looked about. There was just the two of us. Well, yes, I was almost there.

“You came... for... the cherries?” The old woman’s voice was fading, getting lost in her efforts to take breath.

If I was quite here, I would have sensed the smell, which ought to be coming from the gas ring. Only now did I hear a slight hissing. The busy, forever bustling old woman, with the clumsy softened fingers, had pulled the saucepan of jam off the gas ring, whose flame had long ago been put out, but the gas hadn’t stopped whistling through the tiny holes, mercilessly filling the tiny living room with its toxic weight.

“Yes, sister... And I... want,” the old woman whispered in a final effort, before closing her eyes again. She breathed painfully, coughed, quivered on the little sofa, smiled broadly and then slowly released her final breath. I bent down, put my lips to hers and carefully took it in.

On the sofa, in full silence, her body became still. One of a pair.



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# Kristin DIMITROVA

## *I Will Be Back for You*

Kristin Dimitrova (b. 1963 in Sofia, Bulgaria) is a writer, poet and translator. She is the author of the novels *I Will Be Back for You* (2022) and *Sabazius* (2007, translated and published in Mexico, Romania, and Belarus), as well as three collections of short stories: *Love and Death under the Crooked Pear Trees* (2004), *The Secret Way of the Ink* (2010, Macedonia) and *Give Me a Call When You Arrive* (2017, Switzerland).

Dimitrova's poetry works include *Jacob's Thirteenth Child*, *A Face under the Ice*, *Talisman Repairs*, *The People with the Lanterns*, and *Dear Passengers*. Books of verse by Dimitrova were published in Ireland (*A Visit to the Clockmaker*, 2005), the UK (*My Life in Squares*, 2010), the Czech Republic (*The Cardplayer's Morning*, 2013), and India (*Poems by Kristin Dimitrova*, 2022).

Dimitrova is a winner of five national awards for poetry (the Ivan Nikolov Award, the Golden Metaphor, the biannual Ivan Peychev Award, among others), four for fiction (including the Hristo G. Danov Award, the Quill Award, and the Trud Daily Award), and two for special achievement in translation from the Bulgarian Translators' Union for *The Anagram* (1999, a selection of poems by John Donne) and *The Hunting of the Snark* (2013,

by Lewis Carroll). Her own work has been translated into 29 languages and published in 38 countries.

Kristin Dimitrova holds a PhD in journalism and mass communications. *Ethereal Songs and Secret Services* (2015) is her study on representations of Bulgaria in the British, American, and Anglo-Canadian press from 1980-2000.

## Summary

What makes us what we are?

Lazar, 37, an ex-tennis player, born in Sofia, currently living in Brussels, is self-confident but has no professional achievements to be proud of; he is handsome but seems incapable of a deep relationship. During a summer holiday in Italy, arranged by his yuppie girlfriend Lena, he receives a phone call. A long-forgotten voice informs him that his mother has died, so he has to pack and immediately leave for Sofia.

At the funeral, however, he stumbles upon a carefully guarded secret. Lazar sets out to find the truth and after each obstacle he overcomes, the question *Who am I?* receives a new answer. Finally, after losing friends and making new ones, getting lost in the countryside, being roughed up by a group of local thugs, and sleeping in places he never expected existed, he meets his biological mother and is able to see through the web of lies he has been raised amidst.

Sometimes the loss of what we think is ours is the only way to find ourselves. *I Will Be Back for You* is a novel about love that gives and takes away, about selfishness and using others, about loneliness and wandering.

About coming home, whatever that means.

EXCERPT FROM

## *I Will Be Back for You*

by Kristin Dimitrova

*Translated by Tom Phillips*

The church sheltered them from the heat outside in its half-light. An old woman with a black headscarf and the business-like look of an insider shoved unlit candles into their hands. Lazar stepped forward with the unpleasant feeling that everything he had avoided for years lay directly ahead of him. He threw a quick look at the people who had come to the funeral. A loose group of women of pre-retirement age had already gathered and were shuffling around. One—in a business suit, another—the kilograms piled on beneath her stretchy dress, a third—in jeans with a black jacket over them for appearance's sake: they seemed to have nothing in common other than as reminders of how many different, but invariably difficult ways to survive life offered. They were probably former colleagues of his mother's from the Music Academy or current, now former, neighbours, maybe classmates too, friends, with the air of smokers, with luxuriant hairdos disguising thinning hair, with handbags under their arms stuffed with who knows what urgently needed things. He saw them from behind. Everyone was facing the altar with the diffident physical detachment of people who don't often visit this place. Two or three men with the sprightly look of retired tenors could also be seen. They were waiting for the service to begin. Most were holding bunches of flowers. Some were whispering. Nobody was crying.

His father wasn't among them, and Lazar relaxed, even though he knew his relief would be temporary. What an abomination, you come to your mother's funeral and can't stop thinking about your father.

Lena insisted on walking a step behind him—evidently her idea of showing respect for the chief mourner's grief. She looked immaculate in the black suit she'd bought earlier that morning, her smooth caramel hair pulled back, with two locks falling symmetrically on either side of her face, and her long straight legs, hidden above the knee by her straight skirt, made even longer by her high patent leather shoes. Lazar knew how she looked, even though she wasn't walking in front of him. He knew and felt proud of her, as if they were going



into a restaurant, not a church. He also realised that it wasn't appropriate to be taking pride in his girlfriend in such a place, but having gone into restaurants thousands of times and only a few times into a church, he realised, among the soot-blackened frescoes, that he had no readymade thoughts appropriate for the circumstances. Something banal in him—by his own estimation—didn't want to make way for the sublimity that sought to enter his mind through the smoke of the incense and the glimmering light of the candles. He believed that the sublime existed, he had no doubt about that, he would even have liked to feel it. But like everything that came in from the outside, and not the other way round, it remained suspect material. An alien aerosol that, once it had sprayed its mist inside him, would mess up his messed-up life even further. It would set about issuing orders and maybe accusing him too. Every accusation came back-dated. Where were these sublime voices when he ran away from home as a boy and his mother lost her voice? Why hadn't they stopped him? Why had they made him their instrument? Maybe his life would have been very different—his and hers. Maybe she would still be alive.

Not that he needed her when she was alive. But he didn't need her dead at all.

At that moment they opened up both doors and two men brought in the coffin on a trolley covered with a white cloth, the wheels beneath it squeaking. They pushed it hurriedly and indifferently, like hospital porters pushing a patient ready for an operation. Confused, the guests parted to make way for it and started lighting their candles one after another.

A firm hand took Lazar by the elbow and led him to the front. His aunt. He'd have recognised her even if he was blind. She'd lost weight with age, as happens with most raw-boned people approaching their seventies, but the hydraulics that powered her from within were the same—a crudely put-together mechanism of metal scraps from the Second World War designed to penetrate walls. She led him out in front of everyone to stand beside the coffin and left him there. His father was next to him.

Their shoulders touched.

He said nothing and Lazar said nothing.

And the two looked at the coffin as if at an intermediary who wouldn't say anything either.

"Why is the coffin closed?" Lazar hissed.

"Hello, son," his father replied in a pedantically proper way.

"Why is the lid closed? What were you thinking?"

"Your mother told me she wanted it that way."

“When? She didn’t talk to you at all.”

“When she knew that her heart wasn’t right.”

“I never heard any such thing.”

“She didn’t want to worry you.”

“Nonsense. She worried me on a regular basis. With whatever was going through her mind.”

“Let me put it another way: she obviously didn’t expect you to take care of her funeral.”

“You’re lying as always.”

“Almighty God...” sang the priest about a metre from them with a disapproving look that forced them to shut up. He was tall and well-built with a rocker’s beard and a shaved head. His voice stirred the choristers on the balcony over the door, and they started crooning “Hallelujah, hallelujah” in a senile tremolo. The priest began a long chanted Gospel reading in an uproarious voice. He was sincerely conscientious and distinctly pronounced every phrase whilst leaving knowing pauses every now and then as if to convince himself that everyone had clearly understood the reading so far. Something about his manner hinted that anyone not paying attention would be called in for a little chat after the service. He was soon joined by two other clergymen with more amenable faces—one bore the reddish traces of non-stop drinking on his nose and cheeks and the other was droning the Word as if to himself, with the detachment of someone humming something in front of the mirror while shaving. The ritual grew more complicated and was split between the three of them.

Lazar’s gaze wandered off among the mourners who held their candles in silence and occasionally crossed themselves at a sign given by the priests. The church was full of well-wishers, connected by family, professional, local and who knows what ties. Someone had brought them together here, someone had tracked down their phone numbers. All the publicity arranged for the event was in stark contrast to his mother’s solitude during the years he was growing up with her. And now, standing in prime position beside the closed coffin, he also sensed how the rows of mourners were casting furtive looks at him and shamelessly trying to assess his situation—was he mourning, stricken with grief, had he got rich, had he gone down the tubes, was he happy. His father stood upright beside him, his head bowed in grief, though not completely bowed—the angle of his bow was calculated so that dignity prevailed over crushing sorrow. A regular soldier at his post. His brain was probably bursting with possible stinging replies, not one of which could be put to use because the

service had begun. As for all the inappropriate ostentation, his stingy heart was no doubt spent.

And yet the coffin lid was closed. The night before, with a head full of drink, Lazar had been convinced that something about the funeral was amiss. Now that all seemed like a memory of a storm that never happened. The coffin lay there closed and held some kind of secret Lazar wasn't so eager to learn. Whatever there was inside, it seemed to define not so much the truth as the distance he was kept from it.

At that moment a slender silhouette with long straight hair appeared in the light of the open door and quietly came into the church. A young woman, maybe about twenty years old? She was walking as if she were swimming in water, with natural floating movements and shoulders that dipped in the air in counterbalance to her hips. She began weaving through the congregation until she could easily observe what was going on in front of the altar. The light from the stained glass windows illuminated her face. Elongated catlike eyes with an inquisitive snub nose and thin lips curved into something between doubt and a smile. Black hair, divided by a parting. The stranger stood half a head taller than the rest and despite her black clothes made no effort to look sorrowful. Rather she was trying to look invisible, which to some extent she achieved because the front rows had their eyes fixed on the ceremony. But the saints on the walls had probably noticed her already. With effort, Lazar, who'd been following her movements from the moment she came in, turned his gaze away and stared at the coffin. Lena was also somewhere among these people, further back perhaps. She was only taking part in a ceremony that in no way affected her because of him. Well, there was no need to go that far; she could have not bothered.

What was such a beautiful young woman doing at such a cheerless event? Lazar had a good memory for faces, but however much he scrolled through his mental filing cabinet he couldn't be sure they'd ever met. And yet there was something familiar about her. Something like a distant echo that you couldn't hear very well but which you knew was speaking to you. Had she been photographed in a magazine? The girls in those were heavily made up, on the one hand—to come close to the most exacting wanker's ideal, and on the other—to avoid the possibility of the same wanker recognising them in the street and sticking to them like glue. Lazar's eyes furtively darted round for a second look, for confirmation as much as anything, but she was no longer there. The people with candles had taken her place, and their expressionless faces were as empty as the corridor of a government office at the end of the working day.

She'd gone.

She'd probably got her funerals mixed up and, after a few minutes of getting used to the half-light, realised she didn't recognise anyone around her. Lazar's gaze flicked from one face to another, seeking out the new stranger, but it was as if she'd dissolved into the air along with the incense. Instead it landed on Lena's rapt eyes, and she waved to him. The priests were singing a three-part harmony right next to his shoulder while he was feeling like rushing outside to look for the girl. Not that he was attracted to her, no, that kind of beanpole wasn't his type, but simply to ask her who she was and where they knew each other from—in short, to close this half-opened page she'd left behind her, that kind of thing. His father nudged him with his elbow. The chanting had stopped and the mourners were being called to say their goodbyes to the departed. Lazar hadn't noticed this happening. He walked round the white coffin, left his flowers on the lid and came back to reality.

The box with his mother in it.

Endless handshakes followed, condolences and explanations from the family—"I am your aunt Genoveva, your father's second cousin, you came to stay with me as a kid." Gradually the black-clad crowd filed off towards a corner of the church where something like a cocktail table had been arranged and two women bearing a family resemblance to his aunt were handing out boiled wheat and pieces of cake on plastic plates. Conversations that originally began in whispers gradually relaxed into a hubbub, ritual wine was poured into plastic glasses, after the first round, "God rest her soul" switched to "Cheers," and aunts and in-laws and cousins and second cousins who hadn't seen each other in years took the opportunity to ask how they were doing. The thought of death, which had struck everyone with awe at the beginning, rapidly turned into the thought that someone else had died which, in turn, reminded them of the joy of being alive.

An old priest gave a sign to keep quiet and went off to organise the preparations for the next service. Conversations quietened in embarrassment, but burst out again after a minute or two. Lazar went round from person to person in search of the unknown girl, but the only thing he came across were more and more clichéd condolences, pats on the shoulder from the men, and attempts at consoling hugs from the women. He found Lena behind a pillar, her mouth full and a piece of homemade cake in her hand.

Her face lit up and she hurriedly tried to swallow. The dry cake obviously had a mind of its own because it refused to go down her throat straightaway. Lazar handed her the glass of wine he was holding in his hand like an alibi for being at the mournful gathering. Lena took a few cautious sips and smiled at him.

“I don’t think I can eat all this.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I don’t know, they offered it to me and I took it. Shouldn’t I eat it all? I’m afraid I’ll offend someone if I leave it.”

“It’s my mother’s funeral. So you’d offend me the most. And so I’m telling you: don’t eat it. I know these little cakes all too well. My aunt loves them and makes them at every opportunity. She used to bring them to my birthday parties and then we’d throw them out, keeping it secret from my father—so don’t worry. When you chew them, they turn into sugary dust in your mouth.”

Lena nodded gladly.

“Look, Lena, this next part will be quite ... physical. The walk behind the coffin, tramping through the mud, you’ll break your leg in those heels. Maybe there’ll be some extremely unpleasant close encounters of the third kind with my relatives. Please take the car and wait for me at the hotel. Or somewhere else, take your laptop to a café and let me know where you are, I’ll come and pick you up from there.”

Lena hesitated.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to be with you at a time like this?”

“It’s already done with. Now all that’s left are the boys with the shovels.”

“Do you believe your mother’s soul is somewhere hereabouts?”

Lazar was astonished by the question. Not by its contents so much as that it had come from Lena. He hadn’t expected her to take a stroll through such levels of mysticism. Then for a moment he thought he saw the silhouette of the unknown girl among the people, but they rearranged themselves and the illusion dissolved.

“I don’t know. Probably not. And if she’s here, I’m not sensing her. If I know her, she’s probably using her new situation to go round my lodgings and see what I was up to while I was fooling her into thinking I worked in an office.”

“I can’t believe you’re joking about this. If I were in your shoes, I’d be bawling my eyes out.”

“That’s what I used to think. And that wasn’t a joke, believe me.”

Suddenly they both realised they weren’t alone. Lazar’s father had joined them—back stiff, with longish, well-maintained, albeit thinning white hair, trimmed straight and artistically swept behind his ears, and in a jet-black suit which, although new, couldn’t disguise the gaps between itself and the aged body inside. He was holding the ritual plastic glass with the finesse of a lion of the cocktail circuit.

"I'm Lazar's father," he said and extended his hand to Lena. "Pleased to meet you. Vasil Nenov. If I'd waited for my son to introduce us, it probably wouldn't have happened until the next life. And I'm 78 already."

Lena spontaneously returned his smile and offered her hand. She introduced herself with delight, even explaining where she'd got to know Lazar. Then, with exaggerated concern, she lowered her voice and offered him her condolences. It wasn't the happiest of times, she said. She couldn't imagine how he was feeling at the moment after this great change, she said. Nothing to be done, he answered accordingly, nobody could choose their fate. But the dignity with which he accepted it, the ball Lena returned to him, better revealed his character. Lazar looked at one then the other and wondered when they would run out of courtesies. But they continued to draw them from some kind of common spring he wasn't aware of.

"Wait," he interrupted, "why are you two pretending you give a damn?"

His father looked at him indignantly. "I know you weren't brought up in the woods, why are you acting like this?"

"You've no idea where I grew up because you weren't around," Lazar replied without a moment's pause.

"That's not my fault."

"And that's most important, right? Whose fault it was. The judge judges that he isn't guilty himself. Now, when my mother is no longer alive, you can rewrite your pitiful life as you wish."

Lena's face had frozen in the controlled shock of someone opening the door of the wrong toilet. She clearly wanted to withdraw from the discussion but didn't know how. Judge Nenov spotted this first.

"My dear, if you know my son, you're surely used to this. Why don't you two come to lunch at my house after all this is over?"

*My dear*—he's still starting with that! He's become no more than a skeleton, but he's still reaching out his bony hands to anyone who stumbles into his orbit. Lazar pursed his lips in an obstinate expression.

"I don't see any point in ruining our mood entirely with various belated family lunches."

"Lazar, I don't have another son," his father said with an unexpectedly yielding tone. "And even though I've got one, I don't know him. Why are you acting like this?"

"I'd come. With pleasure!" Lena replied and looked encouragingly at Lazar.

It was as if the right things would happen if she said the right words. It was simply a matter of saying them. He waved disappointedly and fell silent.

The coffin went past them on its squeaking wheels, pushed by the two men, and this was the sign that the burial part of the service was beginning. Everyone quickly swallowed whatever they were eating and braced themselves for the new ordeal.

Amid the mud from the day before's rain and the merry songs of the birds who'd nested in the trees between the graves, the mourners, reduced to a reasonable number after the refreshments, followed the hearse in ragged order. It was a silver Mercedes, probably bought secondhand, but its engine was barely audible, a well-made, reliable engine. Maybe it had originally transported German bodies, then Turkish ones—the Turks were mad for Mercedes and it wasn't just them—Germany was full of Turks, followed in number by the English, but then what Englishman would allow himself to be driven off for the last time in a German car? Only a dead one, of course. There were also quite a few Bulgarians, yes. And Arabs now. The hearse's silver paint made its mission seem more optimistic, black seemed to lead directly into oblivion, while angel wings flutter in metallic white. White? Not exactly white, in marketing speak it's called "ivory," anyone who's sold a car knows these things. Ivory, elephant bone, human bone—was that some kind of secret joke? Was it out of the question that the hearse's career had also passed through Italy, and why Italy again, how had he come up with Italy? Well, yes, there were little Italian flags on the bumpers. Old people from homes around Milan, migrants drowned off Sicily, had someone actually transported them in a private car? Will there be someone to transport me?

The heat was becoming unbearable. He took off his jacket and loosened his tie. Even that didn't help. The sun was burning at its post on high and spreading itself around. The hearse had curtains, at least his mother was all right. To be able to lie down beside her now, to lie down and go to sleep. The procession ahead wavered in accordance with the holes in the asphalt driveway and the ability of the less mobile to keep up the pace. His father, holding Lena under the arm, as if the funeral could half pass for a wedding, walked at the head with solemn steps and she—if he knew anything about her—was furtively taking care not to twist her ankle. Solemn music streamed from the speakers of the Mercedes and drowned out the birdsong.

"I don't want to trouble you now," a soft voice said in his ear. The voice was slightly rough, like honey with sand in it.

Lazar turned sharply and saw the unknown girl. Almost as tall as him. Half her mouth shot up in a barely restrained smile. She was younger than he'd initially thought, her height had probably misled him. She was plainly young. She was

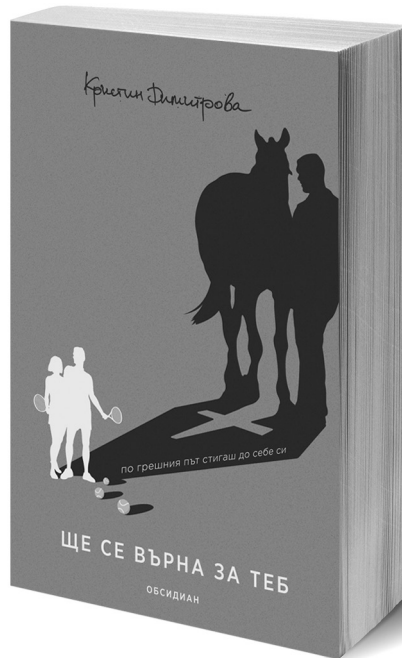
holding a bunch of white carnations, their necks craning in all directions. His heart did a double salto.

“But you obviously have something more important in mind,” he said.

She smiled, this time openly.

“Yes. Seeing you, for example.”

“Why?”



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House, 2022*





# Theodora DIMOVA

## *I Don't Know You*

Theodora Dimova is among the most prominent and widely read Bulgarian writers. She is the author of nine plays that have been performed in Bulgaria and abroad. She wrote the novels *Emine*; *The Mothers*; *Adriana*; *Marma, Mariam*; and *The Train to Emmaus*; as well as the novella *The First Birthday*. In 2007, *The Mothers* won the Bank Austria and KulturKontakt Grand Prize for East European Literature. The book is in its eleventh printing in Bulgaria and has been published in nine languages. *Adriana* was translated in France and the Czech Republic, and the movie *I Am You* was made from the novel. In 2010, *Marma, Mariam* won the Hristo G. Danov National Award for Bulgarian fiction. In 2019, Theodora Dimova was the recipient of the Hristo G. Danov Award for her overall contribution to Bulgarian literature. In the same year, her novel *The Afflicted* was published, later being selected as the Novel of the Year of the 13 Centuries Bulgaria National Endowment Fund and winning the Quill Prize for prose and the Flower of Helicon prize for the best-selling book. In 2022, *The Afflicted* received the newly established Fragonard French literary prize. In 2023, Theodora Dimova won the Grand Prize for Literature from Sofia University.

Since 2012, she has been a columnist for *Portal Kultura*. Her essays have been collected in the books *Four Kinds of Love*, *Orotsi, He Calls His Sheep by Name*, and *Cross of Ashes*.

## Summary

*I Don't Know You* by Theodora Dimova is a novel about the distortion of “the memory of the truth.” The shadows of the past are still present in this sequel to *The Afflicted*. The fates of those “afflicted” by the obscurantist ideology of the recent socialist past reverberates in the velvety but uncompromising novel by one of Bulgaria’s most talented writers—Theodora Dimova.

This masterful story about memory receives a kind of continuation in the novel *I Don't Know You*—an unrelenting triptych about the present poisoned by the past and the resistance of the spirit against the terror of its time.

In *I Don't Know You*, one of the granddaughters of the protagonists of *The Afflicted*, Alexandra, will have to face the bloody terror that the events of September 9, 1944, bequeathed to the whole of Bulgarian society, but in an altered form.

What is the fate of the artist who is threatened by the fist of the powerful of the day? And by the shadows of a regime that seems not to have gone away, but has instead been biding its time like a monster long lurking in its hiding place?

Because the children and grandchildren of the executioners continue to be executioners, while the children and grandchildren of the victims continue to be victims. And the reading of history is again subject to a rotten system of reference. Is there, however, a way out of the vicious circle that our lives have become? Or once Evil has crept in, can it not be stopped?

The COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the political crisis in Bulgaria—all current events from recent years are looked at in the damning mirror of *I Don't Know You*.

Theodora Dimova’s flowing and highly visual writing exposes the distortion of “the memory of the truth” and time, baring its teeth, growling, and ripping to shreds. And it reminds us that ignorance of the past condemns us to live in the “humiliating world of lies.”

EXCERPT FROM

## *I Don't Know You*

by Theodora Dimova

*Translated by Traci Speed*

Alexandra stood stunned in front of Costa Coffee and stared at the backs of the two men who were walking off down Krakra Street and to whom she had just said goodbye. She'd had a meeting with them, their conversation had not lasted more than an hour, but she had the feeling that her life was already divided into two—that from now on, she would measure time before this meeting and after it. We'll see each other again this evening, one had said, for you to give us your decision. Is seven o'clock by the monument in the Doctors' Park good for you? Alexandra nodded automatically without giving it any thought. We don't want to use the phone, for understandable reasons. Alexandra nodded again, as if she understood what these understandable reasons were. If your answer is yes, it'll be nice for us to have dinner together, if you have the time and the inclination, the other had immediately added. I'll call and reserve a table at the Architects' Club, outside, in the garden, they're very strict about hygiene there. I hope you don't mind—if your answer is yes, of course. She had again signaled her consent as if it were clear that there was no way they wouldn't be dining together, if her answer was yes. And that there was no way they wouldn't have dinner precisely there, at the Architects' Club, just a minute away from the Doctors' Monument. She imagined the menu, even the New Zealand white wine, no less than a hundred leva a bottle. And the two of them behaved as if they had no doubt at all that they would have dinner together, it went without saying that her answer would be yes, that she had both the time and the inclination to have dinner with them. The likelihood of a negative answer did not exist in their minds.

Alexandra stood in front of Costa Coffee and looked back and forth between the backs of the two men and the bright red clock showing ten past eleven in the morning; it was the second day of a three-day weekend, the city was deserted and autumnal, she was in the prime of her life—but when haven't I felt like I was in the prime of my life!—Alexandra thought to herself with a bitter smile; she didn't know where she was going, what direction she was headed, the sun

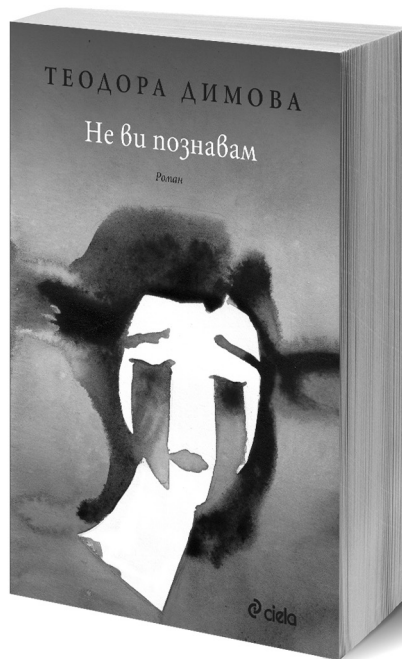
had come out again and had pierced the air and the objects with its bright light, the clouds had scattered, this September morning was captivating, autumn, in fact, was captivating, Alexandra told herself, with its variegated hues, with the sky's saturated blue, even with the rueful sense that something irretrievable had passed and remained ungrasped, un-lived, insufficiently loved. Alexandra stood in front of the café and didn't know what to do with this entire day stretching out before her, endless, as if time had suddenly spilled out at her feet and was untraversable, because she didn't know what direction she was headed in, she couldn't fathom what had happened to her during that hour in the café; something had completely devoured her consciousness of her own life, something vulgar had broken her ties with it, and now she would have to begin reconstructing it, and that's why she stood in front of Costa Coffee as if she had amnesia, staring at the autumn light, at the pile of dried leaves on the sidewalk opposite, which a sudden gust of wind scattered, after which a little girl yanked her hand away from her father's and raced after them; she ran with her uncertain legs after the leaves she chased, laughing, bent down to touch them, and when they took flight, she ran after them again. The moment stopped. The little girl, her laughter, the wind—all merged into one. They were taking part in a shared angelic game. The child wanted to chase the leaves, to turn into a leaf herself and fly with them. She felt her oneness with the world, and rapture flowed from her little face. She stopped and turned to her father to show him the heavenly dance, but her father scolded her uncertainly that she might scrape her knees, that it was dangerous for her to run like that. Thank God the little girl didn't even hear him—joy flowed from her and spilled all around. It's a good thing we at least have childhood, that's the only refuge, Alexandra thought. The people who manage to preserve the childish ingenuousness in their personalities are only the charming and inviting ones. They're the ones who paint the world like a fairytale and see things that remain hidden to others; those people make life joyous, they work miracles on a daily basis, thought Alexandra, standing immobile at the door of Costa Coffee. The others destroy miracles, they debunk them with their vile explanations, the rest of them spread their blindness to miracles like a poisonous contagion; they carry it along the streets, in the trolleys, the subway, and it's more contagious and catching than Covid—these kinds of people should be quarantined, because they're murderers of miracles, and a killer can't walk among people, he's a danger to them, that's why there are prisons, jails, and all kinds of underground punitive facilities, thought Alexandra as the backs of the two men grew smaller and smaller down Krakra Street in the September holiday morning. Since these

people remained insensitive to miracles, they should be put on trial, sentenced, so they couldn't impose their brutality, their smugness, their bovine indifference to miracles, that's why they should serve their sentences until they learned to see them again, Alexandra thought. People like this should be forced to imitate children in order to open their eyes again. It's much more urgent to come up with a vaccine to restore spiritual sight than a vaccine for the next strain of the coronavirus. Because when autumn gradually passes and the wind blows away all the leaves, and the snow begins to fall, the little girl will enjoy the snowflakes in the same way, she'll chase them and fly after them, she'll laugh the same laughter. Only her smile can melt the earth and give it meaning. Without her laughter, the fall will be windy, the winter will be frosty, and all of life will be gloomy and hostile, like those two guys whose backs Alexandra was watching move further away down Krakra Street now. We shouldn't allow this smile to disappear for anything in the world, we shouldn't agree to meetings with people whom we don't know or whom we've only seen once, we shouldn't drink coffee and converse with them, we shouldn't listen to them at all, nor let them speak irresponsibly and drone their platitudes; we have to stop them in their tracks, to put them in their place with a single word, and if not—we have to be able to walk away from the people like that, who hang about near us, licking themselves like tomcats. We have to be able to avoid people like this, even to change direction when we happen upon them; we need to be able to protect ourselves from a lot of people in general, from those who're constantly blathering at us, as if we're the victim they've luckily come across and now they won't let us go until we've listened to all their insipid thoughts about the world, and most important—are left charmed and delighted by their originality and uniqueness. These people have no need to talk to us—we're necessary to them only in the role of their listeners, and if we manage to get a word in edgewise and to speak, they receive this only with annoyance over their lost time, with nothing more than regret that the world remains unilluminated by their reflections. Yes, I have to converse with so many people just because of the theater, thought Alexandra, as she continued standing in front of the entrance to Costa Coffee, and I have to avoid most of them; it's paradoxical, and abominable, and painful to have to have to avoid people, there's some kind of emotional deformity in that, Alexandra was thinking to herself, it's even a serious illness that a person has to fight with all the power of their immune system; needing to avoid people is a serious psychological condition that needs intensive treatment, Alexandra told herself as she looked around and couldn't figure out which way to walk, where to go, or what to do this whole day

that suddenly stood before her so desolate. Avoiding people is not the kind of harmless illness you can still go to work with—it can do serious damage and have consequences leading to a lethal outcome, because what is suicide, really, other than avoiding people? And I'm doomed to constantly flee in order to protect my vision, my eyes—I have to transform the blindness, ignorance, and bovine indifference spreading everywhere into something that's still bearable, into something nevertheless not quite so repulsive, to be a magic wand that sees and communicates only with the good and the intelligent in the person, and not with his petty schemes and mediocre ambitions hidden behind the bombastic clichés, Alexandra stood thinking in front of Costa Coffee in the deserted fall morning.

The hushed atmosphere of the café again appeared in her mind as she continued standing in front of its entrance, looking at her watch to establish that time had advanced, and that she still didn't know what to do or where to go. She remembered how until just ten minutes ago she had watched a ray of sun glimmer on the glass of the tabletop and reflect in the eyes of her interlocutors, the two men whose backs she was still staring at, irritating them and making them water; now, on the sidewalk in front of the café, she suddenly felt as if her clothes were made of sheet metal, as if she couldn't move because the Alexandra before this conversation had nothing in common with the Alexandra after, because she had ever so stupidly fallen into a life-long trap from which there was no escape. She remembered how after they had barely said goodbye, after they had agreed to meet at seven in the evening by monument in the Doctors' Garden, she had again remembered summer, and it was as if she had forgotten about it till now; she remembered the yellowed leaves, the smell of dust on the sidewalk, the unstable clouds from which not even a drop of rain was likely to fall, so it was unlikely to flush out the city, it would hardly freshen up its streets. It smelled of dust, of clouds, of fallen leaves, of something stale and dirty, unaired; it needed rain, it just had to rain, a storm should break out to clear the air, instead of the death throes of another hot day left without its autumn storm, not this suppressed tension in the atmosphere, not this oppressive sweltering suffocation from which there was nowhere to escape. Alexandra continued standing in front of the café, surveying the passersby, trying to look as if she were waiting for someone who was late, glancing at her impressive, arrogantly black watch that had involuntarily riveted the gaze of her so recent interlocutors. She couldn't come to her senses, neither to get her thoughts in order, nor to really realize what had happened, as if she were drunk and couldn't judge very well, as if they had harmed her with a psychotropic substance or exposed her to chemtrails, those chemical elements

that extraterrestrials release over Bulgaria in order to decrease its population... What's happening to me, really, am I going to pass out and die at any moment now? And would anyone notice? And if someone noticed, would they not say, oh, I'm in a hurry, I have something important, let someone else call 112 to come get her. And if this someone else didn't walk by for another ten minutes? Which was entirely realistic, since today was a holiday; people were in no hurry to go out, lounging about, drinking their coffee, eating a big breakfast—these were, after all, respectable people, upright, they didn't go to meetings with people they didn't know, they didn't receive indecent proposals, they didn't sit drinking cappuccino with men eaten up with power, who undressed them with their eyes, groped them in their imaginations with their sausage fingers, and weighed up how to exploit them, to put them to their own use. No, upright people didn't go meetings with men who put their own baseness and mediocrity on display in the most disgusting manner, because not only did they not consider themselves base and mediocre, no, these two men in suits, whose backs Alexandra was watching recede down Krakra Street, it was their presence that had made her clothing weigh her down like sheet metal, made her feel paralyzed in them and like she couldn't move from the entrance of the café.



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Ciela Norma Publishing,  
2023*



# Bozhidar MANOV

## *People With Nicknames*

Bozhidar Manov (b. 1947) is a film critic with hundreds of publications in print and electronic media; he is a professor, a Doctor of Sciences in Art History, and an honorary citizen of Sofia. He was vice-president of FIPRESCI (The International Federation of Film Critics). He is the author of nine books on cinema (theory and criticism) and the translator of six novels. The short story collection *People with Nicknames: Sad Stories* is his second book of fiction after *An Inconceived Fellow* (2004). Why sad stories? “Because those kept popping up in my memory and my imagination simply finalised them. Plus, I had read somewhere: ‘No one is born for happiness, we are all born for life.’”



## Summary

Bozhidar Manov explains the characters of his new book *People with Nicknames* as follows: “Day after day, night after night, my ‘people with nicknames’ never gave me peace, so I decided to ‘talk’ to them through the computer screen before they became completely blurred in my mind like living images from an unfinished dream. And to line them up as best I could on the cobblestones of the unkempt street leading to Stroshena Cheshma, which I hadn’t even seen since childhood, which would mean at least sixty years ago. Shattered memories, stuck into an arbitrary mosaic of faded incidents, which time arranges as it pleases, and I try to put into words.”

“These ‘sad’ stories commanded me to read them in one fell swoop and shook me. They are a sincere confession of the virtue and the vileness of man, of his decline and his greatness, of the infinity of man! I was struck by their authenticity, as if they had been experienced not only by the author but by me. Life in them is both real and interwoven with quiet moral messages, it draws and subdues the reader. *People with Nicknames* is a memorable achievement in contemporary fiction.”

Vladimir Zarev, author

“These stories are truly, utterly sad. But strangely enough, they don’t fill us with pessimism and despair because the author’s compassion lifts us above hopelessness. People’s everyday existence flows alongside their naive and plain-spoken words. The characters do, in fact, have complex personalities, but find no escape from their difficult and even suicidal fate. And we the readers seem to hear once again in Bulgarian literature the sympathetic words of the classic: ‘God, how much sorrow there is in this world, God!’”

Mihail Nedelchev, literary critic

FOREWORD FROM

## *People with Nicknames: Sad Stories*

by Bozhidar Manov

*Translated by Gergana Galabova*

**T**hey come into my mind unexpectedly, always uninvited, always by surprise.

I have met some of them in my childhood, in the poor Sofia neighbourhood around the old Mother's Home Ob-Gyn Hospital (left unnamed between the otherwise famous Banishora and Draz neighbourhoods). Others I have seen around the Stroshena Cheshma neighborhood in my father's hometown of Tsaribrod—now in Serbia. When I was a child, it was still the former Yugoslavia's Dimitrovgrad, and growing up, I always considered it a painfully plucked away piece of the Bulgarian homeland in the Western outskirts. Once, way back in 1919, after the Treaty of Neuilly, my father, a high school student and conscript, fled to his older brothers in Sofia to avoid joining the army there, since they were known to harass Bulgarian soldier boys.

I am a refugee child on my mother's side, as well. My grandfather Theohar Popmihailov, a native of Krushevo, in what is today Northern Macedonia, participated in the revolutionary committee for the Ilinden Uprising. As an educated young man with several languages under his belt (he studied in Constantinople), he worked at the local Turkish post office. This was considered the most trustworthy and unsuspecting place in town, so he hid dynamite for the uprising in the attic of the post office. After the defeat, he fled with his mother and some luggage on two carts through the surrounding hills, first to Kyustendil, then Dupnitsa, and at the end of 1903 he settled in Sofia. I never knew him; he died on New Year's Eve of 1941 from intestinal entanglement. But my mother has shared many of his tales about patriarchal life during the transition between the 19th and 20th centuries—with the distinct characters and unique vocabulary (archaisms and Turkisms) of distant old Krushevo.

And so, during the pandemic isolation, while suffering for two weeks from the insidious Covid-19, my “people with nicknames” started casually wandering around my half-confused consciousness, brought up from childhood memories and the above-mentioned refugee retellings. And when the fever eased up and the insomnia disappeared, I saw them marching down the dishevelled street towards Strosheņa Cheshma in my father’s native Tsaribrod. But to my amazement, they were accompanied by the stubborn fellows from my grandfather Teohar’s Krushevo and various other offbeat characters from my childhood summers at Belovo Station, my maternal grandmother’s birthplace. I used to see them in the shade under the inn’s arbor—inside several of the younger men were playing bar billiards, and the floorboards, greased with oil the night before, smelled like the sleeper ties from the nearby railway. The innkeeper, Bai Minko, was using a three-meter rope to pull a wooden beer box out of the freezing waters of the Yadenitsa River, three hundred metres before it flows into the slow and warm river Maritza. In the late afternoon, as I waited in the shade of the walnut tree for the village goatherd to gather the flock and return the goat to the last aged grandmother of my vanishing clan, I see through the cloud of glowing dust, as in a faded color film, our poor street around the old Mother’s Home in Sofia (in that neighborhood left unnamed between the famous Banishora and Draz neighborhoods). And in the dust I make out the silhouettes of the shoemaker, Bai Gosho, with his two-by-two-meter workshop and a wooden peg between his teeth, waiting to be hammered into new soles with a measured swing; the butcher, Bai Sando Byul-Byul, who “pinches” meat from the casseroles of housewives; Militiaman Milan from the attic above the bakery, smooth-shaven in the morning on the way to his shift, drunk in the evening coming back; pretty Velka from the second floor of the unpainted house, and below her behind the barred window, Mara Opalchenkata with her missing teeth and the hairy mole between her eyebrows. And moreover—Bowlegged Ivan, scaly scabs on his hands (from the acid, because he works in an electroplating workshop); the opera singer Big-Chested Lily—we watch her getting changed through an open window in the evening (best seen from the mulberry tree one yard over); Bai Onik, an Armenian cobbler with bushy eyebrows, and in the same yard Bobby the Skirt-Chaser, with his great moustache and bad rheumatism, which stopped him from chasing the girls. At some point a slender dark-eyed Arab, a student at the Agronomy Faculty, swooned over the neighbourhood’s other beauty—Zorka from the corner house. They got married, he took her home, but she came back soon after, because he had two other wives there. The athletic sons of the old carpenter

Bai Stephan became coaches, and from abroad they brought back and sold the first waterproof tracksuits, and even a transistor as big as a first grader's book-bag.

Later, when I was a university student, I read everything published by contemporary Bulgarian authors (poets and fiction writers). I was particularly delighted with the fictional village of Yugla from the stories of Georgi Mishev. When I later met him on the occasion of an interview for the magazine *Cinema Arts*, I realized this was his native village of Yoglav, but rendered in his prose with a reworked name and populated with literary characters reborn from his authorial imagination.

Only through the pandemic isolation did I realize that my “people with nicknames” never left my memory; on the contrary, very often, always at night, they wandered through my confused dreams, as if wanting to tell me something, but either I didn't understand them, or they chuckled silently and without saying a word, sank somewhere into the focusless space of sleep, while I woke up still not understanding where I was in the first few seconds.

And so day after day, night after night, my “people with nicknames” never gave me peace, so I decided to “talk” to them through the computer screen before

they became completely blurred in my mind like living images from an unfinished dream. And to line them up as best I could on the cobblestones of the unkempt street leading to Stroshena Cheshma, which I hadn't even seen since childhood, which would mean at least sixty years ago. Shattered memories, stuck into an arbitrary mosaic of faded incidents, which time arranges as it pleases, and I try to put into words.

Why sad stories? Because those kept popping up in my memory and my imagination simply finalised them. Plus, I had read somewhere: “No one is born for happiness, we are all born for life.”

And because it is easy to live when you are cheerful; but it is hard when you are sad.

That's why.

*Short story collection, 160 pages*  
ISBN: 9786190212188  
Colibri Publishing House, 2023

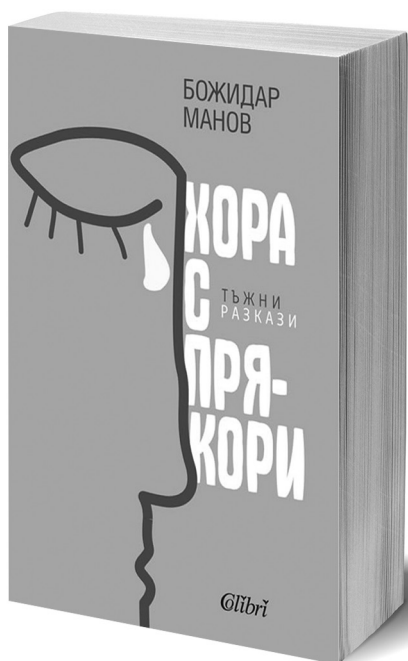


Photo by Tatyana Chohadjieva



# Ivanka MOGILSKA

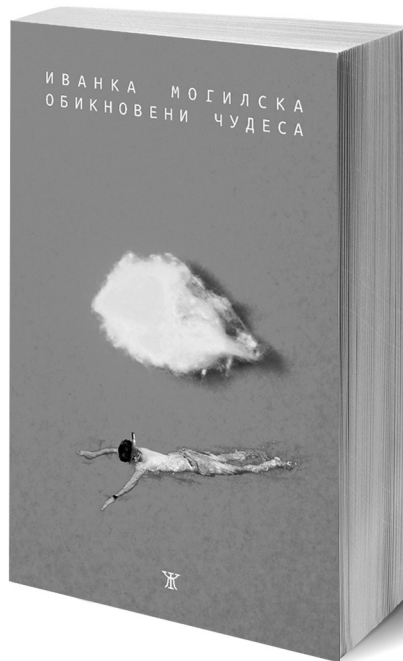
## *Ordinary Miracles*

Ivanka Mogilska (1981) is the author of seven books: the short story collections *Ordinary Miracles* (2023) and *This Land, That Land* (2017); the novels *Sudden Streets* (2013), which was published in Hungarian as part of the L'Harmattan Press's European Prose series, and *Hideaways* (2007), with which she participated in the European debut novelists' festival during the Budapest international book fair; the story collection *Colorful Soap Bubbles* (2022); and two poetry collections. Her first poetry collection *DNA* (2004) won the Pegasus Award for Best Poetic Debut at the national Southern Spring Competition. Her second collection *In Other Words* (2010) was awarded the Vladimir Bashev National Poetry Prize.

Mogilska is a playwright and frequent participant in various performances of Bulgarian and international collectives presented in Bulgaria, Germany, and the Czech Republic. Her poetry and prose have been translated into English, French, German, Hungarian, Russian, Serbian, Farsi, and Bangla.

## Summary

Ivanka Mogilska's short story collection *Ordinary Miracles* is filled with sea, sun, and people facing all kinds of real and imagined ups and downs in their daily lives. And for the most part, they find ways to overcome them. Some of the characters approach things quite practically. Others hide away in a world where their problems don't exist. Yet others turn the problems into a crutch that helps them move forward. What they all have in common is that they're traveling (the stories take place in Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, and Spain). It's traveling that brightens up the characters' world and helps them come to terms with themselves, with those around them, and with their gray, frightening, colorful, deceptively safe life. The stories appear light-hearted, as they manage to recount traumatic experiences in a bright, gentle, and non-dramatic way. Readers aren't going to find incredible or miraculous events that turn human lives upside down. But they will meet people like themselves who bravely dive into the depths of their fears or hopes, and create, both for their own sake and for the sake of others, ordinary miracles. Each and every day.



*Short story collection, 156 pages*  
*ISBN: 9786191868285*  
*Janet 45 Publishing House, 2023*

# Meeting Liza Minnelli

by Ivanka Mogilska  
*Translated by Ekaterina Petrova*

Cornelia was so excited by the discovery that she didn't even manage to enjoy the first night of her long-awaited vacation. Liza Minnelli herself was at the campsite!

They were having dinner when Cornelia saw her come into the restaurant. She walked toward the place's largest table, which was basically right on the beach, next to the sea and the boats. The colorful tails of her shirt waved at the other customers. A gray-haired man with a mustache followed her. He had short legs and a belly that hung over his trousers. They were just ordinary linen trousers, into which an even more ordinary white short-sleeved shirt was tucked. The two of them sat down. The waiter rushed over with a pitcher of water and a couple of menus straight away. They ordered some white wine, which was also brought to the table in a flash. Liza Minnelli and the man looked each other in the eyes, clinked their glasses together, and took sips. Then he reached across the table, she gave him her hand, and the two of them stared off into the sea.

Tugging at her husband's sleeve, Cornelia—in a cross between squeaky exclamations and whispers—tried to explain what she had just witnessed. Misho just grunted derisively, then focused on his chicken. He'd driven all day so they could arrive in time for dinner. He was tired, hungry, and though he had only a vague recollection of who Liza Minnelli was, he was certain there was no way she'd be here at this Greek campsite.

If they weren't seated so close to the celebrity couple's table, Cornelia would've gone into further explanations and discussions. But in the next instant, she saw something that made her completely forget about the octopus on her plate, about

Misho, and about everything else in the world. A whole procession was headed toward the singer's table. It was led by a young Liza Minnelli wearing shorts, a tank top, and flip-flops. She was a little plumper, but otherwise identical. The hairstyle, the thick eyeliner—everything was identical! A tall, ginger-haired man with a beard walked behind her. Two kids were running after him, while at the back of the line, another, even younger Liza Minnelli was walking slowly, as well as a man whom Cornelia did not get a good look at. They all sat down around the large table. The waiter appeared right away with a pile of menus and a pitcher of cold water, and as soon as he saw them, shouted a cheerful “Kalisperaa!”

The group laughed and responded with “Kaisperra!”

The waiter looked at them and roared: “Kalisperaa!” They obediently repeated after him. He commended them on the effort, handed out the menus, and retreated.

In the meantime, the sea and the sky had taken on a black, even color. Although the restaurant was illuminated by lanterns hanging from the tree branches, which gave it a cozy air, Cornelia felt a chill coming from the darkness. She pulled her cardigan tight around her and turned to her husband. Misho had already finished his dinner. He was smoking a cigarette, drinking white wine, and not reaching his hand out to her across the table. He was handsome, even at his age. His temples were framed by silver hair, which endowed his slightly drooping lips and oval chin with an even nobler appearance. Cornelia sometimes wondered whether in a previous life he'd been a Roman patrician. He was now telling her something about the children and the house and the renovations he'd make when they went back home. He still held out hope that their two children's families, along with the grandchildren, would come live with them, if he'd only make the house more comfortable. Cornelia listened absentmindedly while sneakily glancing over at the large table by the beach. The three Liza Minnellis were laughing, the men were raising toasts, and the children were pouting over their food.

Once again Cornelia tried to bring her husband's attention to the group and tell him what was going through her head while she watched them. But her attempt unfortunately coincided with Misho's hand waving as he ordered another bottle of wine from the waiter. While pouring some wine into her glass, he caught her eye, then nodded toward Liza's husband and said, “That guy looks like this one German porn star.”

“Mishoooo!” she slapped his hand indignantly. “I think he looks like Richard Burton. Even though he was married to Elizabeth Taylor. And I guess he's already dead.”



The second bottle of wine got them reminiscing about their youth. Not that they were old now! Not at all! As her husband liked to say, they were teenagers at heart. But her head felt heavy, and she had trouble keeping her eyes open. She leaned on Misho as they walked back to the bungalow, between the rows of hushed tents that lined the illuminated paths. She was used to leaning on his arm, but for some reason she felt a tinge of sadness. It crossed her mind that she'd failed to notice when Liza Minnelli and her offspring—for they couldn't be anything else!—had left the restaurant. Then she relaxed into the bed and fell asleep.

She slept badly. She kept waking up, her eyes burned in need of more sleep, and terrifying questions echoed around her head: "Could I have lived my life differently? What if I'd stuck with my dance lessons and kept a stricter diet, what if I hadn't told my son that I regretted having had him so early on?" She kept dozing off, then being woken by the laughter of a Cornelia who danced beneath her eyelids, which felt as though they were filled with sand; a Cornelia who wore a short white tunic with a plunging neckline speckled with sequins. That Cornelia was telling the audience that tonight's show would be shorter because she wasn't so young anymore and now had a metal plate in her pelvis. She kept tossing and turning in the bed, checking whether her lower back really did hurt or whether it was all just a dream, until Misho squeezed her in a tight hug and she fell back to sleep.

She woke up with the first rays of sunshine and ran over to the campsite's shared bathrooms.

She had just put toothpaste on her toothbrush and put the brush in her mouth when Liza Minnelli came over and stood by the sink next to hers. She looked at Cornelia in the mirror, smiled, and also started brushing her teeth.

At first, Cornelia froze. She didn't even manage to smile back. Then she began brushing her teeth energetically without taking her eyes off the mirror. White foam was running down Liza Minnelli's chin. Her face was twisted in a funny expression and her gaze was focused—perhaps she was counting the brushstrokes on each side. The water from the faucets gushed into the two sinks, and the lights hummed. If anyone walked in, the sound alone would be enough for them to know that she and Liza Minnelli were brushing their teeth to the same rhythm!

Cornelia rinsed out her mouth and summoned up the courage.

"You're Liza Minnelli, aren't you? Forgive me for being pushy, but I'm so excited. I've seen all your movies, and I love listening to your music. My husband

even said that if you came to perform anywhere in Europe next summer, he'd take me to see your concert. So you take good care of yourself! I'm so glad I got to meet you. I used to dance, you see. I used to dance quite well. Everyone thought I had a bright future ahead of me. My teachers kept telling me, 'Stick to a diet and keep practicing!' and I kept practicing. I don't know what went wrong. One day I woke up, and it was gone. That feeling, you know, the feeling that would make you dance even if you had a metal plate in your pelvis. It was gone. Nothing's happened. I spent my whole life as an English teacher. Soon I'm going to retire. I have a wonderful husband. I love him so much. And I have two children. I was so glad to see you all together last night. With your children. Everything I've ever read about you says that you don't have any. That you tried once and . . . I understand why you've kept it a secret, you have to protect your family from the press. I see what's happening with our media, they're like monsters. But you've managed it, and that's great. I've thought a lot about this, about how you have such a glamorous life but you don't have a family. And I've wondered, can one live on glamor alone? Isn't it better to have a home, where people are waiting for you? It's true that we all sometimes want to run away, but you have so many concerts and shows, it shouldn't be too hard to find a place to escape. Forgive me. I've been talking too much. I'm so tactless. Misho keeps telling me that. But it's because I'm so excited and so happy, you know . . ."

Liza Minnelli had put all her toiletries away in her toiletry bag and now stood motionless next to Cornelia while still looking at her in the mirror and smiling. She didn't stir even after Cornelia fell silent, exhausted and embarrassed by all the excitement. She just stood there and stared at their reflections for a while. Then, for some reason, she replied in English with a French accent: "Ask your husband to dance, madam." Then she winked at her, and disappeared the same way she'd appeared.

Around noon, Cornelia and Misho left for a nearby beach town—they had decided to drive along the coast—and the two women never saw each other again. After they went back home, Cornelia signed up for dance lessons.

# Virus in Paradise

by Ivanka Mogilska  
*Translated by Lora Petrova*

It was the second spring they were being protected from the dreaded virus and the third day since it had been announced that tourists could enter the country again as long as they were vaccinated. It was an early afternoon in late May. The heat was already expanding, sticky and heavy, through the terraced streets of the village perched on the hill of the island.

Polixeni's shop, a huge cellar with two entrances, was open on both the lower and upper streets. Inside the cool room, between the shelves of packaged foods, the refrigerated display case, and the ice cream freezer, stood a large wooden table. Around it sat Polixeni, her friend Paraskevi, and Vasilis the priest. They were drinking coffee and chatting. Occasionally, one of the women would refill the plate with biscuits.

The three of them were almost the same age. In his youth, the priest had baptized both women's children. Later, he performed the funeral service for Paraskevi's husband and Polixeni's parents. When one of the women had lost her way to God and couldn't see the point of even getting out of bed, Father Vasilis had helped her find it. When the other had felt weak and wondered if it wouldn't be better for everyone if she left her husband and children to seek another life in the wide world, he had helped her regain her strength and do what she needed to do. Theophilus hadn't even realized he was in danger of being left alone to look after the twins and the shop. But he was like a holy dove—innocent and convinced that everything would sort itself out, so it wasn't that surprising.

The storms of their youth had passed. The burdens of middle age too. And not only theirs. There were about a hundred inhabitants left in the village—all of them about the same age. The young people had moved to the city. Most of the houses had long since been bought up by hotel and villa management companies and awaited their temporary occupants, whitewashed with blue window frames and hibiscus pots outside the doors. Suddenly the place had become a postcard. Life here also flowed on like a colorful postcard—calm, monotonous, and without much turmoil.

Tourists would come to look at the church and take a couple of pictures they would never look at again. Father Vasilis held the church service on Sundays and everyone who could still walk would come for it. Rarely did anyone seek him out for advice and support the rest of the time. It was this that made him stoop, not the years. His greying beard hung limp and matted over his cassock.

When the word got out that a dangerous virus had appeared somewhere in the world, even more so when they heard it was approaching them, everyone shuddered. All sorts of things were being said... If a sick person touches you, you get infected. And you can't always tell who is sick, it isn't obvious. If you've had more adversity in your life and you feel your heart is cracked and jagged, the virus feels it, too, and it lives in you until it wears you out. If you put on a show of being healthy and strong in front of others, but inside you are shrunken or empty, or a worm is eating at you—envy, fear, doubt—the virus doesn't fall for this, it finds you, moves into the worm's place, and gnaws at you until it chews you up completely.

The more the TV talking heads advised people to stay at home and not go out, the more the villagers needed to get together. And where else but the church? They came in groups, they came alone. Each with a question and a concern.

Father Vasilis was waiting for them at the entrance—upright, calm, with a kind smile. Every hour or two he sprinkled his beard with holy water—just in case—and combed it with his fingers. He greeted people, listened to them. He found the right words for everyone. It wasn't hard for him; he knew their life stories in their entirety. He didn't wear a mask, as the regulations required. And he advised his parishioners not to wear one. If they couldn't see each other's faces now and find support in one another, then when could they?

The government closed the borders, set a curfew, and mandated that going out was allowed only for shopping or truly pressing needs, and even then only after sending a text message. By that point, the villagers had calmed down. Alongside the advice he gave them, Father Vasilis assured them that the virus was catching non-believers and was a punishment for them. While all of them living on this island were already in heaven. It wasn't hard to convince them. They and the tourists, insofar as there were any, said so—this piece of land in the middle of the sea was heaven on earth. But apparently these days they didn't feel like stepping through the Pearly Gates. The first summer that the authorities protected them from the dreaded virus, hardly any people came off the ferry. For one thing, the journey was difficult and accompanied by reams of paperwork and expensive tests. Another thing was that they were afraid.

On TV and radio, they said the virus was wreaking havoc around the world for a second year and claiming victims. During the long winter days, and even after that, Father Vasilis was a welcome guest everywhere. They awaited him with trepidation and listened to his words with a sigh of relief. Their children—grown men and women with families of their own—did not come up to the village. Who knows whether it was because they were protecting them or because the mandates were observed in the island's main town, so they couldn't go out... Their parents weren't quite sure, but thanks to their conversations with the priest, they weren't so afraid for them and their grandchildren.

Only Polixeni's husband went down from the village to the town—to fill his clunky old car with goods to restock the shop. “See that? Don't you see how the servant of God, Theophilus, goes in and out of the fire and comes back to you unharmed?” sometimes Father Vasilis would point at him on Sundays. He would squeeze his Polixeni's hand, listening and smiling. No one had an inkling that this holy dove was hiding a protective suit and a mask in his truck. He'd put them on just before he reached town, grab whatever he needed, and head right back. He'd stop somewhere off to the side of the deserted road that ran along the cliffs hanging over the sea, disinfect himself, and head back to the village.

Until that hot May afternoon, when Polixeni, Paraskevi and Father Vasilis were drinking coffee in the shop and chatting, no one in the village had fallen ill. True, occasionally someone would cry that their child or grandchild had caught the disease, but the sick recovered quickly and without complications. TV channels blared news of the infected, the sick, the dead. Villagers heard that people were dying in their country, too, lots of people. But all around them the sea still shone and dazzled them when there was sun; when there wasn't, the ghostly bluish silhouettes of other islands peeked through the clouds. Father Vasilis and God watched over them all. Their children called regularly. Now the tourists would be back, too. Entering the country was easier, and those who had no faith now had vaccines.

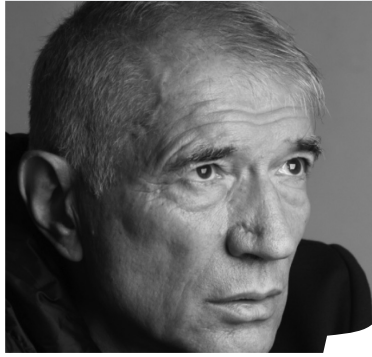
This was what the two elderly women and the priest were discussing when the silhouette of a man appeared in the doorway of the shop, from the upper street entrance. He stooped to enter, came down the stairs, and found himself right beside Paraskevi. Behind him, a girl was descending at a trot, a striped scarf wrapped around her head. They mouthed something in English behind their masks and looked around.

The shop had more things to look at than to buy. On the vertical beams that held the wooden shelves, Polixeni had arranged pictures of her twins and

grandchildren. She'd also added one of her and Theophilus laughing. Their granddaughter had sneaked up on them two years ago, when they were celebrating their 40th wedding anniversary. Beans, lentils, rice, and macaroni were on the shelves, arranged in a row. Next to them lay laundry detergents, a few packs of matches, dusty children's toys. On the linoleum, which had not been replaced for decades, a person with a slightly more vivid imagination could see the outlines of all sorts of shapes.

None of the three got up to meet them, none of them asked what they wanted. They just returned the greeting and stared at them with undisguised interest. These were the first outsiders to come to the village in two years. Paraskevi thought that with these masks they looked to her like thieves who had just realized that they were taking a risk in vain. The girl asked for ice cream and Polixeni gestured to where she could get some. The man asked for a large bottle of mineral water. Before anyone could move, he saw the refrigerated case behind Father Vasilis and tried to squeeze behind his chair to reach it. The priest struggled to his feet to make room. The man laughed, mumbled something behind his mask, and gently placed a hand on the priest's shoulder. With his other hand he reached over and grabbed a bottle of water. He and the girl paid and walked out.

The three of them remained frozen and numb around the table. The huge man with the smiling eyes had put his hand on Father Vasilis's shoulder and flinched, nay, he almost jolted with fear. Both Paraskevi and Polixeni saw it. No one dared look at anyone. They sat with their eyes fixed on the floor, thinking only that the virus had come to them at last.



# R

## Palmi RANCHEV

### *Chaos in the Game of Foosball*

Palmi Ranchev is a boxer, coach, owner of a cafe and a gambling hall, head of a newspaper, TV presenter, journalist, unemployed... “A writer in a drawer,” according to Rumen Leonidov. Palmi Ranchev’s works have been included in Bulgarian and foreign literary anthologies. The films *A Trip to the Horizon* (dir. Anton Radoslavov) and *A Little Luck for Later* (dir. Alexander Smolyanov) are based on his stories. He won the Southern Spring Award for his poetry collection *Manhattan, Almost Eventful*, and the Pencho’s Oak Award for *The Sofia Berlin Wall*. His collection of short stories, *Tonight Nothing Is Accidental*, won first prize for fiction in the Portal Kultura competition. He won the Bank Austria Prize for East European Literature (2008). His short story collection *A Little Luck for Later* and the novel *Direction Sacramento* have also been published in German.

## Summary

In his novel *Chaos in the Game of Foosball*, Palmi Ranchev experiments with the schizophrenic absurdities and existential transformations of his characters, through which he explores the reasons leading to Bulgarians' constant sense of being scammed and of eternal injustice.

“Palmi Ranchev is one of those authors who imitate no one—and no one is capable of imitating them. His books are often nominated for major literary awards in this country. The establishment doesn't like him, and that's why I trust his answers.”

Marin Bodakov, poet and literary critic



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EXCERPT FROM

## *Chaos in the Game of Foosball*

by Palmi Ranchev

*Translated by Gergana Galabova*

...the beginning is prepared by TV  
Interviews,  
ads, rumors, unexpectedly high fees,  
public  
gatherings, shouting, hypocritical oaths,  
applause...

**R**ight in the middle of the game, Kunetsa asked: “Ollie, do you have any special abilities?”  
“What do you mean?”

“Do you have abilities in some field?”

His friend, large, with a slightly sagging chest and round belly, had covered half the gaming table with his outstretched elbows and was currently pondering his next move. He could shoot without preparation, with maximum force, attempting to find an opening to the opposition’s goal line, or he could continue the play.

“Do you have other skills besides...”

“You’re distracting me! Can’t you see it’s my turn?”

“Okay, I’ll ask you the same question another way. Do you think that nature has made sure that you develop in some sort of direction?”

Ollie hesitated for a moment, wondering if his friend’s talking was a ploy of sorts, a feint to dull his attention. But Bobby the Vent, tall, thin, and flat as a ribbon, hardly required such rubbish. When it came to foosball, he had long been proclaimed the Player, the Greatest, the Giant. So he continued with a fairly predictable pass.

“How do you expect me to answer that?”

“I don’t think most people have particular talents. They’re not born with a purpose. With an idea. They can only do shit work. They earn a few bucks and live out their allotted fifty-sixty-seventy years.” Ollie, or rather the Oligophren, to use his full nickname, missed the ball in mid-field; he deflected it left so it would lose some energy before it landed at the foot of his primary defender.

“So what?”

“It’s frustrating!”

“I don’t care. I myself just want to play all day. And beat you at least once. Totally spank you. Otherwise, I beat everyone else here.”

“Okay, you don’t want to be a surgeon, for example. There are surgeons who specialise in hand surgery. They know all about bones, nerves, blood vessels... And if, say, a bomb goes off in your hands, that doctor...”

“Fuck them doctors!”

The two of them, bent over the gaming table, exchanged several blows in succession with incredible force, completing what they could not put into words. Then Ollie looked up, turned his head, and continued: “I know a bomber. The blast blew his hand off at the wrist. They couldn’t reconstruct anything. He looks like those dogs in that Cruella de Vil movie.”

“Dalmatians.”

“Right. Wait till you see his face.”

After scoring yet another point, Ollie took the ball and moved it between his fingers, his round bowl-like face becoming even rounder with a satisfied smile. He moved his flabby shoulders, his chest and stomach following suit. He felt more than satisfied. He wished he could know how Bobby took this latest point. He couldn’t meet his friend’s gaze, though he wanted to.

“Eighteen and a half years all I’ve learned is how to play foosball. Nothing else. I manage to make a buck here and there, and that’s it.”

“But at least you’re the best. You might even become world champion.”

“Are there world cups for this game?”

“Why not? There’s one for spitting gum.”

Ollie’s hefty body spilled over half the table again. Beads of sweat appeared on the deep lines like a musical staff of his forehead. A pass followed, then another, hard hit—and a goal. He wiped the beads of perspiration streaming down his face with the sleeve of his sweatshirt and, agitated, continued with his usual

smack-talk: “Right now, Kostov, patron of the democratic idiots and intelligent pickpockets, is handing over to Moser... to his Aunt Moser...”\*

“Enough!”

“And afterwords... to that nasty commie!”

“Oligophren, cut the crap!”

“Then the Prime Minister of Prime Ministers intervenes again...” Ollie continued, ignoring him. “He has been waiting to be admitted to the Bulgarian Socialist Party and the Union of Democratic Forces ... But very patiently... And he’s no secret agent... Because he’s one of the most special... And that’s a goal!... Goaal!”

He scored his fourth point in a row. This time he’d started from the bottom of the field, then with a feint and two lightning passes he’d covered most of the field. In the end it took only a tiny movement to increase the score.

“Kostov with the blue lips... Passes over to flabby-assed Bakardzhiev... They’ll blow up the Mausoleum!... With that guy inside... What’s his name?...”

“Shut up, I told you!”

“I can’t hear you. I don’t hear anything when I’m on a roll. Goal, goal!...”

Bobby failed to block the ball yet again. He saw it, knew what to do and was a split second too late. He felt helpless and confused. His hands were out of sync. Something was off with the timing. The seconds, the minutes, they were like insects buzzing over his head; they moved, bumped into each other, scattered into a pile of disorder; then hovered over them both. Opposite him Ollie furrowed his brows and signalled something with a look: there was likely someone more important behind him. He was in no hurry to look that way. Finally, he saw his mother. She was standing by the front door, looking around with a grimace of restrained disgust, probably because of the noise and the puffs of cigarette smoke. Bobby turned and walked toward her. Ollie caught up with him and tugged at his shoulder.

“What do you want?”

“Fifty cents, Vent.”

“The game’s not finished.”

He freed himself with a sharp movement of the elbow. He walked over to the chair where he’d hung his jacket. He grasped it by the side with both hands and lifted it from the chair. It was heavy. In the inner left pocket was a live grenade.

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\* Ollie’s smack talk here ironizes the chaotic post-socialist political situation in Bulgaria in the 1990s; Ivan Kostov was the leader of the Union of Democratic Forces and served as prime minister.

He bought it from a soldier who was expecting to get fired, since everything was going to hell, the whole country, not just the army, and he was selling off whatever he could haul away from the unit. In addition to the bomb, he offered him an officer's Mauser from World War II, complete with a long barrel. The gun cost a fortune—and the payment was in dollars. Now, as he was putting on his jacket, he touched the grenade with his palm and almost erased his memory of the game. He'd lost, so what. After countless victories, he was entitled to that pleasure, too. Except behind him Ollie was breathing heavily. His mother pulled a round pink purse from her bag, flicked two fingers. She handed him a fifty-cent coin. She turned her back as Ollie took the change. Then they both stepped up to the foosball table, and he asked her: "Aren't you at work?"

"They closed the salon."

"You'll find someplace elsewhere. It's easy for you."

"Malinov refused to pay me," she said after a few steps, "Said I had two unpaid fines"

"What scams is that scumbag on about?"

"Well, he's making it up! He comes in, stands there, looking around. Then it turns out he'd fined someone..."

"Okay, got it. Now go!"

His mother bowed her head and stood still for a moment. Bobby continued without turning around. Almost immediately she hurried to catch up with him.

"Talk to him... About the rent, the bills... You said you knew his daughter."

"She's from his first marriage. And we just met."

"But it might make him feel some shame."

"His type don't feel shame. Don't you know? Go on, go home!"

He waited until his mother reached the far corner of the street, and he too started off. He wasn't thinking either of what had happened or of the failed game. He could only see Milena. Probably because of his mother's reminder that they knew each other. She was sitting on the bed or lying on her side, propped up on one arm. He remembered kissing her breasts, sucking on them. As soon as his hands reached her waist, she would grab his wrists. And move them further up. *I shouldn't ask for too much*, he told himself then. Or should he have asked? Then, when it was finally clear they weren't going to make it to the endgame and they wondered who should leave the room first, Bobby suggested he could stay; or not leave at all. Let everyone think I couldn't stand being so close to your amazing tits, he said. Are you mocking me? In what sense? Because of my breasts. To be

honest, they're more than amazing. And I'll be dreaming about them. I warned you not to mock me! Clenching his fists, he saw the familiar buildings: the three empty offices, built over a year ago, that were available for rent. Next to them was the administrative office, that's where Malinov's office was. The food and fake perfume shops were at the far end of the courtyard, the hair salon was next to them. High above the buildings stood a metal scaffolding with a sign: MALINOV COMMERCIAL COMPLEX

The light inside literally blinded him. One wall of the corridor was made of reinforced glass. Outside, the sun shone as if through a magnifying glass. He turned and pulled open the heavy door. Controlling his every move, he lingered around the entrance, oblivious to anything around him. His first steps had been made so difficult by a huge man with a smooth, sweat-damp face. He had been standing in the middle of the hallway the entire time.

"I would like to speak to Mr. Malinov."

"What do you need him for? Do you have an appointment?" The giant fiddled with the sleeve of his shirt, then touched the end of his wrinkled nose. Bobby tried in vain to meet his gaze.

"I want to talk business with him."

"What's the business? This ain't a hostel. Come on then—round and out!"

The giant's unexpected tirade surprised him. But it was also reassuring. As rude and aggressive as he looked, he didn't attack him, he just stood and waited.

"How are you so sure we don't work together?"

"I'm sure!"

"Or I might have a business proposition."

"Come on, scram!"

"The business I'm here about is important."

"I told you, disappear!"

"I don't understand you, Mr. Freak! You have a good-natured country face. Yet you greet me so inhospitably."

The giant stepped towards him. Bobby reacted in time and kept the distance between them. The guard didn't seem to want them too close together either.

"You're talking a little too smooth, Mr. Freak. But there's nothing to it. You just need to back off. I don't want anything else. I said I need to talk to your master."

"And I told you, dickhead. Get lost!"

"Right? I don't think I heard you."

"You're the cleaner's son, right?"

The giant stepped forward again. He didn't take a real step, just a half-step or a threatening movement. Bobby stepped back again, his clenched teeth bared. He fumbled in his jacket pocket, pulled out the grenade and raised it above his head.

"You see what I have in my hand?"

"I don't care what you got, dude. I'm starting to count. One, two, and on three you'll be on the floor."

"I don't think you're looking closely enough."

"Go away, brat!"

Bobby followed the giant's gaze. And bared his teeth again. His pent-up fierceness, coupled with the feeling that he was in charge of the situation from this point on, was overwhelming. He imagined the grenade going off and sending arms and legs and whatever else there might be flying. Boom, and then they're gone. He felt something like elation. And he'd do it if he had to—no second thoughts. That was how he felt.

"Want to see how the grenade goes off, huh?"

"Wait a minute, brat! What is this childish bullshit?"

"I didn't hear you right."

"Wait, I said!"

"Don't you think I'm doing the talking now?... I'm calling the shots, you sorry fat-ass!"

Bobby was careful not to rush the next step. Let the guy in front of him have time to retreat. He wasn't so sure he was going to detonate the grenade anymore. Mission accomplished. The giant definitely filled his pants.

"Fat bastard, you'll fly like a feather."

"Easy there... Let's not do anything stupid!"

"You freaks will do as you are told because you get paid, and I will do as I please. Whatever I like."

"I told you!..."

"Who's paying attention to you now, dumbass!"

The huge man across from him was wondering what to do next. His face expressed quite obvious hesitation and uncertainty. Bobby took another step with a threatening motion of his hand, scowled again, growled: "Don't torture your pathetic brain. You only have one right move."

"I told you, just calm down, boy... If the bomb is real!"

"How can I calm down when I've got a real bomb, huh?"

Bobby rested his palm against the reinforced glass wall and looked out. Silhouettes of moving people could still be seen around the shop and hair

salon. Workmen, at least a dozen, were carrying barber chairs and large mirrors. At the far end of the courtyard, he caught a glimpse of Malinov's figure.

"Now, you open it, not the executive's door, but the one next to it. And don't try playing tricks. You make one sketchy move and we'll get blown to bits."

"All right!"

"Come on! I guess you've figured out I'm crazy."

The giant moved his shoulders, and the two sweat stains on the front of his brown shirt with elbow-length sleeves came together. He opened the side door and remained with his hand outstretched. Bobby made a threatening motion with the grenade and he stepped aside. He kept an eye on the giant, as well as the people outside. A group of workers were still carrying out the furniture from the barber shop; two were smoking; one was gazing up at the sky. Someone asked in an unnaturally thin voice when the truck would arrive. Malinov turned his head slowly towards them both. It must have seemed unnatural to him that his personal monster, servant and bodyguard, should be standing with his hand outstretched. Was he warning him or begging him to stay away?

The giant spun around and went into reverse. "Boss!"

"What? Why are you walking like that?"

Bobby leaned against the glass wall. He didn't let them out of his sight. He raised the grenade above his head and shook the green orb menacingly. "Now, Mr. Boss Freak, you know what this is all about?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about!"

"Give my mother her money as quickly as possible!"

"Who is your mother?"

"Don't play dumb. How long has she been wiping your ass? She earned that money. She was wasting her time with you on Sunday."

"The cleaner..." the giant chimed in.

"Ah, I remember now. She has two penalties."

"I've cancelled the penalties! Give her the money quickly, 'cause I can't stand the sight of you!"

He was so angry with Malinov's dumbass reaction that he wanted to throw the grenade at him at that very moment. Just like that, like a stone, with all his might, and hit him in the crotch. What was he thinking?... Actually, who cares what he was thinking... He wasn't going to let him act superior... Not to him!... In the next instant he realized it would've been considerably better to stand closer to the wall. Then they couldn't surprise him from behind. Unfortunately, he recognized

the better tactical position too late. From behind, someone pinned him down with two hands across his elbows. He made an attempt to free himself and nearly dropped the grenade. Almost immediately the other bodyguard pinned from the front. He literally disappeared between the two of them. He stopped breathing and wanted to throw up. He wasn't sure if it was from the pressure of the two of them, or the sickening closeness with their hot, sweaty bodies. He growled, gritted his teeth, finally screamed: "We're blowing up, you morons!... All three of us are going sky-high!... Right now, at this very moment..."

"Help!" Someone shouted from far away.

"Bomb!" Another voice was heard.

"Save yourselves!"

"Run! It's gonna blow!..."

The two of them pushed off him almost simultaneously and threw themselves to the side, lost their balance, yelled, growled, and crawled briefly on all fours, one after the other. They stood up and fled in two opposite directions. For some time Bobby, clutching the grenade to his chest, did not move. He needed to figure out exactly what was going on.

The two bodyguards were still running. So he was free again. Nothing else mattered. Finally he lifted the grenade above his head and threw it with force toward the hair salon's window. The green orb flew the distance in a parabola, pierced the glass with a barely audible sound, and thudded into the empty room. He counted to three, then again. There was no bang. Then he remembered he hadn't pulled the pin. And he laughed.

He ran, screaming: "I'll be back, freaks! Don't you think I'll leave you alone?"

In fact, he hoped never to see them again.





# Edvin SUGAREV

## *Core*

Edvin Sugarev was born in 1953 in Sofia. He graduated in Bulgarian philology at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. Until 2010, he worked as a researcher at the Institute of Literature at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences; he also taught at the New Bulgarian Studies Department at New Bulgarian University. He was a member of parliament to the Seventh Grand National Assembly and in the 36th and 37th National Assemblies, and served as Bulgarian ambassador to Mongolia and India, and Consul General in Niš, Serbia. He was the editor of the samizdat journal *Most* or “Bridge” (1989); he was a founder and long-time editor-in-chief of the weekly *Literary Newspaper*, as well as director of the newspaper *Democracy*, and editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Literary Journal*. Since his retirement in 2020, he has been a freelance writer. He was the winner of the 2004 Novel of the Year Award from the Development Fund, the Grand Prize for SMS-Poetry (2005), and the special prize in the Binyo Ivanov Poetry Competition. A prominent literary critic, Edvin Sugarev is the author of five academic monographs, as well as hundreds of articles. His literary works include the novel *The Impossible Refuges of Poetry* (2005); eight books of journalistic essays; a book of prose fragments *Silent Film Plots* (2017); two books of frag-

ments *Harvesting the Honeycombs* (2013) and *Core* (2023); four collections of short stories, three of them published in France; and more than two dozen poetry collections, including *Kaleidoscope* (1990; published in the US, 2020), *Indra's Web* (2007; published in the US, 2023), and *Prodigal Sons* (2023). His works have been translated into English, French, German, Italian, Catalan, Hungarian, Czech, Serbian, Turkish, Japanese, Hindi and other languages.

### Searching for the Hidden and the Unseen

Edvin Sugarev stands among the contemporary authors who defend the possibilities of the strange genre known as “the fragment”; he does this not only in poetry, specifically in the form of haiku or something close to it, but also in prose. *Core* is his second attempt, following his 2013 book *Harvesting the Honeycomb*. Yet the intuitive poetics of haiku, the spirit of Zen, hover here as well, seeping like a sunbeam through the crown of a walnut tree, shining.

The subtitle of this book is *Shards of Memory*. “I remember...” is how many of the fragments in it begin. Yet their intention is not to glue together the “shards” of a human life that is draining away, as slowly as a sunset, into memory. Instead, they simply flash for a moment before sinking deeply down again, to the essence. From them flows the wisdom of one who is on a journey to that which is beyond the visible, beyond the superficial values of modern civilization, so as to reach quiet and profound essences.

These fragments of prose have distinct voices—but primarily they sound like poetry, like the blues, like the echo of a gong in a Tibetan monastery, like silence. Deep knowledge of the East is a sieve through which our “Western” reality is filtered, so that the essence remains in shimmering flakes. Yet what is visible in this book is only a sign of what is hidden beneath, which has no name of its own. More than anything they—the fragments within it—capture reality, the present, in their ethereal web. There is much reality in them, plain and easy to recognize, but also much mysticism, which reveals slices of the enigma that lies beneath.

Here the big and the small fuse imperceptibly, like the firefly and the star; and nothing is big, nothing is small.

A search for the hidden and the invisible—that is what the fragments of speech in this book represent; the searching, but not the capturing, not the grasping onto it, rather only separate, fleeting touches and letting it pass on by... (What is this “it”? Everything: the world, life, you yourself, dear reader, scattered within them...) This is a mystical book. When we get through it, if we’ve been careful enough along the way, we’ll be wiser, even if we don’t understand it.

And finally, incidentally—this is a book that has already made sense of the recent pandemic as an existential impulse.

Books like this (and like *Walden*, one of its parallels) are mystical and religious books. They should be read that way—that is, not read, but rather experienced, lived in.

Plamen Antov, poet and literary critic

E X C E R P T F R O M

## Core

by Edvin Sugarev

*Translated by Angela Rodel*

\*

It is not the shell, nor the wrapper, nor the mask that is important. What's important is *the core*.

\*

Writing fragments does not mean gluing together the shards of the broken vessel of life. It means precisely the opposite: destroying the whole, having understood that it is unattainable; staring at the ornaments of the visible world; scattering oneself; becoming a thief of moments that the machinations of time will never be able to string together.

\*

Home is not the walls and the roof over them. Home is what you have *experienced* under the eaves.

\*

Imagine your favorite books gathering dust on the shelves; the stones you've touched so lovingly piled in some cellar; the clothes you've worn wrapped in mothballs in a trunk no one opens. Imagine the house you inhabited filled with other bodies and other laughs. Imagine a thin ray of sunlight slipping through the heavy leaves of the walnut tree you loved to sit under. This is the thread that connects and remains.

\*

Be a seeker of the unknown, an inventor of worlds. Fear not the hollowness that devours your footsteps, nor the sad frozenness of what has been achieved. Remember Rumi's words: "What you seek is seeking you."

\*

Lord, help me raise myself up. Lend a hand from where you are, in the heights—though I know you cannot touch my palm.

\*

Human life is fragile. Everything that exists is fragile. We owe our lives to the fact that, for now, comets have just missed our planet or that some freak virus has not yet found quite the right mutation to wipe us all out. We are like cherry blossoms blown to the ground by the wind. And in that fragility lies the very *core* of being, its scent.

\*

The root does not remember the seed from which it sprang—and the seed does not remember the root that called it to life, pushing the life-giving moisture towards it. Yet the link between them, the chain of their tiny metamorphoses, still exists—and what's more, it is indestructible. Be a seed, grow into a tree, become the cause for new seeds to sprout across the world.

\*

The atavistic in me clamors, it does not cease. Like the howl of a trumpet in a tormented Black quarter, like the cicada's shriek that slowly gnaws at the curtains of haze, like the cry of a newborn that will only days from now be thrown into the Ganges or the Nile because no one wants to allow the coming of a new kingdom, whose prince has emerged from beneath the very depths of time.

\*

I remember the bells that rang under the eaves of the Amarbayasgalant Monastery; the little llamas who came running, lugging huge copper kettles; the flocks of ravens that circled the sky; the indifferent roan horses that grazed by the shore of the distant lake; the mountain resembling a reclining woman at the far end of the landscape. It is indeed strange that this was—in my still plodding life.

\*

Living is delicious.

\*

I sense the scent of walnut for days on the palm of my hand, after that sacred afternoon in which—sheltered beneath the dark beams of the old shed—we peeled the thick green hulls of young walnuts for hours. A scent of freshness and antiquity at one and the same time. A scent that still *intoxicates* me today—because it has preserved a tiny piece of the sharp and penetrating sensibility of childhood.

\*

God has not shaped us from mud. He has mixed love and loneliness, belief and despair, hope and nostalgia. He has said: get up and walk—and find within yourself the innermost core of being, give it the courage to be, utter it—for this utterance is your mission, your responsibility to the universe.

\*

A raindrop—is it not a message from God, a seal through which existence is proven? But do you know what—it dripped onto my cheekbone and twinned with a tear.

\*

Every missed moment is a betrayal of being. Life consists of attention, sensing, understanding. When they're gone, you're gone too. And with every breath you take, a debt accumulates that you can no longer repay.

\*

Are we the ones thinking, or is someone else thinking within us? Or perhaps someone else is thinking us, someone else is *thinking us up*?

\*

Do not seek security, because there is none. Learn to be intoxicated by uncertainty, by the eternal flux, by the cycle that brought you here to this world and that will carry you off elsewhere; appreciate the *fragility* of life and taste its loveliness—that is bliss, there is nothing else.

\*

The most universal existential rule has long since been known: do what you have to do and let be whatever will be. The whole trick is knowing *what* you have to do.

\*

Perhaps human life should be measured by *what has been missed*, not by what has been achieved in it. Perhaps God, too, uses this to calculate how much a soul weighs—and lets the light souls fly off to heaven, while those overburdened with the plunder of life sink into hell.

\*

God, you ask? But he is in you, *living* in your core.

\*

The hardest thing is not to lose faith in yourself, in the meaning of your existence here, on earth. Anything else you might be able to handle, but it's *lack of faith* that destroys.

\*

Birds make alliances with silence.

\*

Childhood is a camera obscura, preserving sensations and sights. I do so love returning to them, returning through them to the place I set off from. The goats on the roof of our old house in Kyustendil. The scent of walnut clinging to my hands, which peeled green hulls all day. The crunching of silkworms nibbling mulberry leaves. The coolness of the water in the glazed pitcher. The morning light, in which I wandered barefoot through the dewy grasses and was certain that this world would never end.

\*

The human being might be a mistake, but *the human* is not.

\*

True dignity is *standing up* for who you are—beyond all the masks and layers, and in the face of all that wants to appropriate you, to make you a subject, to take away your freedom.

\*

There is no reason to drag fear behind you like a shadow. Let it go—let it fly away. Let go of everything that incites it. Finally, let go of the false, forcibly layered idea of yourself—as something different and opposed to everything else. Have you let go of that too? Now you're ready—you're ready *to be*.

\*

I am drinking tea—but in the stillness of the afternoon, I can sense the tea sipping from me as well.

\*

Doing anything at all requires sacrifice. Writing poetry requires *everything*. All kinds of time. All kinds of extremes. All kinds of exposure to pain—if only to achieve the mindset from which such writing is even possible.

\*

Fear of change. We all experience it to one degree or another. This fear is overwhelming—it implies clinging to what is; a mindset that *refuses* to accept existence as something temporary, in which the spirit resides, and whose necessary metamorphosis is death. Yet in this refusal we actually cripple ourselves, turning our backs on the very essence of life: that it flows and changes, and that we change with it, shimmering like sunlight on its surface. Fear of change is inherently a refusal to touch beauty, to be penetrated by it, to feel its healing effects. Only that which changes is truly beautiful.

\*

There is an invisible arch over the abyss—over every abyss that human wreckage confronts us with. Seek it within yourself, step out.

\*

I remember Bari: the narrow streets where neighbors holler through open windows, the gaping doorsteps beyond which women make homemade pasta, the old men playing backgammon sitting by the gates, the noisy gaggles of young men arguing in the piazza, beers in hand, kicking up an indescribable din. What has become of this world *now*, in these times of imposed solitude? Will its inhabitants be able to resurrect it when the pandemic has passed?



\*

He who is born to fly is not well received among those who tread the earth. When they draw near to him, they always hold a pair of scissors in the hand hidden behind their back. The scissors that will clip his wings.

\*

Being is not created by someone, not established with a certificate of validity from its creator. It is a spontaneously dancing energy that flows from form to form—and it has no beginning, nor will it have an end.

\*

The destruction of religions and spiritual teachings, their transformation into a kind of *appendix* inherited from the past, irrelevant to the existence of the billion-strong human organism, is the greatest tragedy of modern times. And not so much because of what is lost, but because a space has been freed up for mass existence, a context in which everyone worships the god of consumption, and life has become flat, one-dimensional and materialistic, without spiritual imperatives and without transcendental dimensions.

\*

There is only one true revolution: the revolution within the spiritual space of the individual. Until he emancipates himself from his own self, until he transcends his stature as a mortal being, the human being remains a *slave* to his I, formed under external pressures and shackled by the matrices that unify societies—however much we try to re-educate him in the spirit of some moral or religious values.

\*

Words are a harsh, unsupported, often deceptive medium. The heart knows more, can do more, creates spaces beyond that which we are able to express.

\*

Sometimes the voice inside you goes silent—and you cannot figure out where it has gone, where it wanders, whether it has found some *other self* as a crack through which to utter its insights; some other consciousness in which to construct its imaginary worlds. Don't be sad, enjoy the silence within, pour yourself a glass of gin and contemplate how the sun gilds the trees before spilling into the sunset.

\*

Stones are memory incarnate.

\*

The beauty of writing. The immense tension and profound peace that this otherwise searing work gives you. And most of all: the feeling that in the moment of writing, you are not only you; within you **another**, more richly gifted and generous being comes alive.

\*

The only truly shameful betrayal is losing faith that the fate of the world depends on you, too.

\*

The candle starts to sing amidst the listening darkness.

\*

The running out, the exhaustion of meanings; their replacement by the moronic screams and fireworks of consumer society; the lack of depth and sacredness in our lives; the *disenchanting* of the divine world we inhabit—these are just some of the sick signs of our civilization, clinging to the material like a drowning man clutches at a straw.

\*

Barefoot on the grass. That magical childhood feeling of the dewy grass touching your bare heels, which seems to send the dark earthy juices coursing *through you, too*, teaching you how wonderful it is to be alive. That's what you miss now: barefoot on the grass.

\*

When my house, where I had spent nearly two decades, was stolen, I felt true pain. Not because of the walls and the things, not because of the land it was built upon, but because of the hundreds of sunsets I had contemplated from the large porch, because of the bells of the herds returning from pasture, because of the poems written there, because of the memory of the loves that had passed there, because of the melancholies of autumn and the awakenings of spring. I grieved a little, and then said to myself: there is *no way* all of this can be taken away.

\*

There is no escaping pain. Accept it, don't resist it. Make it a *part of you*. Unite it with hope.

\*

And don't timidly ask your God if you can be happy. You must be.

\*

To be a writer is to abandon all rules, to forget all obligations. To forget the dangers that stalk you and the torments that lie ahead. To forget about yourself because you are not important. In the end, you are only a tool.

\*

It's no big deal when it hurts. It's a big deal when you get numb.

\*

I dreamt Jack Kerouac snuck in through the door, put on my old slippers and snuck back out. While I walked out barefoot into the mud and watched him walk away.

\*

Since many words were spoken, yet I actually heard nothing at all, since the meanings of the words are lost like blown dandelion fluff. Listen to the wind's song or to the roar of the sea's waves; whatever God has to say to you will be *through them*—he knows no other language. Listen through them, not to understand, but to become a water-filled cave or membrane, to become the dwelling place of echo, a memory of reverberation; to be a resonant box for all that is unspoken; for everything for which there are no words, which begins from and comes from nowhere. And only when all this has died away, listen to the silence, to the stillness—for within it is indeed the message—and the threshold of your home, prodigal son.

\*

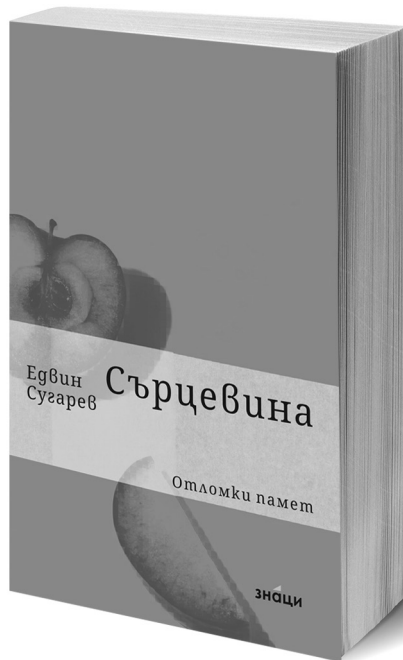
The past has long tentacles—and knows how to grasp.

\*

An old man in his faded anorak, with a ginger dog on his knees, sits amidst the meadow in a wicker armchair. His eyes are blue and deep—they have seen the northern seas, the Amazon jungles, China. In his sailor's trunk is a blueprint of a ship that will not be built and will not sail anywhere. What do you see, grandfather? There is no way he can answer me. He opens his silver case, bites down on a filterless cigarette, and lets the smoke carry him away—somewhere into the past that *belongs to* him alone—like a circled and conquered territory where the present cannot set foot.

\*

When writing the word love, the letters fall completely short. With all the silence within yourself, with the emptiness of the large and the small, with the sunrise and the sunset—try!



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2023*



# Todor P. TODOROV

## *Hagabula*

Todor P. Todorov (1977, Sofia) is a Bulgarian philosopher and fiction writer. Todorov speaks English and German fluently. He is the author of two collections of short stories and one novel: *Tales for Melancholic Children* (2010), *Always the Night* (2012), and *Hagabula* (2022). His short stories were translated and published in Germany by Groessenwahn Verlag (Frankfurt am Main). In 2011, he won the Rashko Sougarev Prize for best fiction short story for “Van Gogh in Paris.”

His novel *Hagabula* received the Bulgarian National Literary Prize for the year 2022 from the National 13 Centuries Bulgaria Fund. It is the most prestigious literary prize in Bulgaria; previous winners include Georgi Gospodinov with *Timeshelter* (2021). *Hagabula* was also among the nominees for the Helikon literary prize. *Writersque Literary Magazine* (Nottingham, UK) featured a translated excerpt of the novel.

Todor P. Todorov has been a guest writer at many book fairs and festivals, including Leipzig International Book Fair, Sofia International Literary Festival, Crete International Literary Festival, CapitaLiterature, and others. In 2013, Todorov participated in the Sozopol Fiction Seminars organized by the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation, where he worked with Richard

Russo, Jeremiah Chamberlin, Natalie Bakopoulos, and other internationally acclaimed authors. In 2015 Todor P. Todorov gave a talk at the “A Night of Philosophy” event in New York, organized by the Cultural Services of the French embassy and the Ukrainian Institute of America. He also had literary readings at the KGB bar and the Bulgarian consulate.

After 2012 Todorov has gone on literary tours in Germany, where he presented the German editions of his short story anthologies: *Hexen, Mörder, Nixen, Dichter. Dunkelmagische Geschichten* (2012) and *Immer die Nacht* (2016). He had literary readings in Cologne, Leipzig (including the Leipzig International Book Fair), Halle, Munich, Berlin, and other locations. In 2014, Todor P. Todorov participated in the German-Greek Literature Festival at Paliochora on the island of Crete, Greece.

Since 2001, Todorov has taught courses on the History of Philosophy, Media Culture, Posthumanism, and Mythologies of the Future at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. He also teaches a course entitled “The Flattening of The World” (“Die Verflachung der Welt“) in the international MA program on Media, Communications, and Culture (Frankfurt—Sofia—Nice) in German. In 2019-2020 he taught a course on Mythologies of the Future at TIESS (Transdisciplinary Institute for Environmental and Social Studies), Thessaloniki, Greece.

Besides his latest book *Hagabula*, his recent publications include the short stories “All Our Ancestors” and “Dream Pavilions” published in English in *Writersesque Literary Magazine* (Nottingham, UK). He presented “Dream Pavilions” at Literary Talks Sofia 2022, whose special guest was Olga Tokarczuk. Todorov’s texts have been translated into English, German, Greek, and Croatian.

## Synopsis

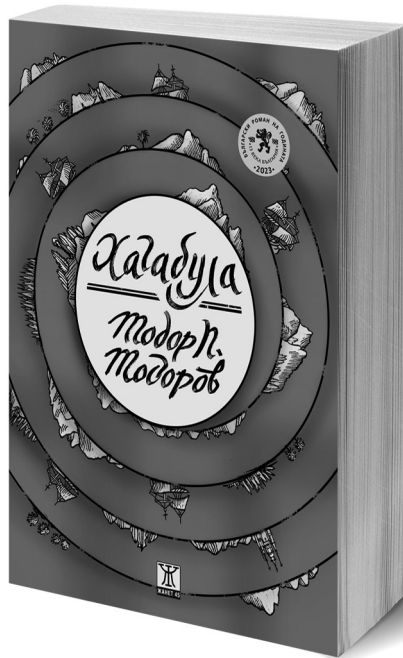
*Hagabula* is a utopian alternate history of the West. The novel tells the story of a form of life long lost and forgotten in the great conquest of reason and power. It explores the bond to nature, all other living beings, and the many primal meanings of existence that the violence of progress disrupted and broke. The story takes on the nostalgia for the original forces of life—the painful longing that defines the modern condition—from an ecological, feminist, and postcolonial perspective. Playing with genres, *Hagabula* encompasses magical realism while employing adventurous, mythical, and surrealist narratives. It often utilizes a fictional, counterfactual history or geography, introducing a simultaneously familiar and unexpected reality.

Set in the early 16th century, it follows Hernan Cortes's expedition to a mystical black mountain, the navel of the Earth, somewhere in the West Atlantic, beyond the "meridian of fear." During its climb, the expedition encounters bird people, sand vampires, pale underground dwellers, ocean ghosts, a Garden of Pleasures, and finally, the Aztecs at the top—all living metaphors for the repressed but primordial forces of life. The protagonists traverse an enchanting, dreamlike reality, which leads them to unpredictable discoveries and an ending of cosmogonic scale.

Meanwhile, the Aztecs are fighting their gods, whom they accuse of insatiable divine hunger and cruelty. The conquistadores want to colonize the mountain, subjugate and enslave all its peoples and creatures, dig up its gold, build cities, roads, workshops, and houses of stone. Cortes dreams of turning the jungle into plantation fields, constructing machines capable of flying, building underground transportation tunnels, taming and vanquishing nature, lighting up the night as bright as day, and making people richer and happier than gods. However, when he meets the Aztecs at the peak, he realizes the only enemy has always been the mountain itself. He now understands it as an organism, a living being on its own, a creator of lives, and a spirit possessing inhumane powers. When he decides to burn the redwoods—the heart of the mountain, the bridge between the worlds, the umbilical cord bringing earth and sky together—his transgression unleashes consequences beyond control. When the mountain starts dying, all its peoples and mythical beings cross the ocean, conquering and destroying Europe. Sunflowers cover Amsterdam; the spores of mushrooms capture the Latin quarter; Madrid is a shady forest where bears roam and parrots screech. Jackals howl along the abandoned roads; ferns and pines cover the earth. Europe is a

wild forest in whose womb owls and vipers nest. Life is revived and restored. The world is undone—hagabula everywhere.

“Hagabula” is a word coined in the witches’ language, a word they learned from nature and life itself. It points to rebirth and new life—what everything and everyone longs for, but it also relates to rebellion and war. The word is older than the world. The witches play an important role in the novel, as bearers of secret and forgotten wisdom, whom the protagonists meet in the Old World before their travels. The witches are the founders of the worlds. They embody the mystical, feminine power of life. They fight an everlasting war against the order of men who have enslaved women, all people, and even nature. They are the reason for bringing the expedition together and leading it and all of life to its final destiny. They intertwine the stories and fates of all the characters building up the ultimate meaning of *hagabula*.



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EXCERPT FROM

## *Hagabula*

by Todor P. Todorov

*Translated by Todor P. Todorov*

### Chapter 1

#### **Hernan Is Dreaming**

**A** condor descends over the ocean, barely touching the water—rejuvenation, grace. The wings and the sky—all is illuminated, the waves burst into flames. A white sail shines in the azure. A linen sheet at home repeats the same tune, gently blown by the wind. Two serene hands, the scent of soap and spring. And in the palm of a child—the thread of time. The earth and the sky, the rain, each blade of grass, everything rises. The peony opens up for the sun. A breeze gusts, the primrose shivers, a bee lands in the blue blossom. A dewdrop hides in the walnut leaf. A child dreams of butterflies illuminated by lightning. Someone is running. The afternoon drops slatted shutters over the corn fields; it is getting late. A woman is crying in the moonlight. Stars illuminate the firmament, fireflies paint over the night. Summer is the mother of all, and the world never ends. But there, something darkens. The condor is looking for land, its wings captured by shadows. A lonely ship sinks into the sea. Everything is distant—the youth, the hours, the years. Only Spain is forever, never forgotten. Thunder devours the dream of the fish that just swallowed a castaway. In the heart of the tiger, a deer is born. A cold cyclone plows the steppe, chases wolves, cranes, and snakes. The wilderness shatters, something in the taiga is silent. They are mooring the boats in the harbor. The wind whispers black blessings, the fishermen draw on their boots. A dark moon rises—a sun made of gloom. And there it is—night rushes on from the other world into this one. Hagabula everywhere.

Hernan awakens, his forehead sweating. His eyes are moony, still unseeing beyond the dream. He gets up and walks along the deck. The night shines upon him—a cloak encrusted by fire. He stares into the darkness ahead. His face is burnt by the sun, his hair—scattered by southern winds, scorched by heat. His boots, red as blood, made of salamander skin, creak over the wooden floor. The

wind billows his clothes, tickles his skin, makes his bones tingle with pleasure. His steps pierce through the silence. How deadly quiet it is here. The world is lost—he feels like the last man on earth.

A lone gnomefish traverses the water beneath the ship, and the dim swells light up for a moment in its silver shining. It does not take an interest in the fleet above, its eyes fixed on the ocean depths. Far below, something in the sand is stirring. The land ahead is already in sight, two-three hours of sailing. Monolithic peaks and grey rocks, shores washed in moonlight and behind them: woods grim as the brows of a sleeping monster.

“Black motherland, womb of wonders! Here I am,” Cortes cries. Only the wind and the heartless howl of the woods reply to him.

As they step onto the shore, the sand still feels hot. Despite the darkness, all gleams white. Every stone and every grain of sand—all is light. The expedition unships and moves on foot through the narrow ford beyond the rocks, leading the horses loaded with bags, weaponry, sacks full of maps, compasses, food supplies, and tobacco.

“Salgado,” Hernan says.

Salgado, his secretary, sports an uncut beard framing a sallow face; his hair is tied in a ponytail. He turns slowly—not awake, but a sleep-walker. The flame of the torches illuminates his eyes, turning them into lakes of glass. Something fearsome awakens there. An alien gaze. His skin is inhumanly pale—he looks like a hermit, a lost prophet.

Like somebody abandoned forever.

“God, where are you?” Salgado utters. And then: “Nothing good awaits us here.” Silence sets in. Then he speaks again: “Nothing good.”

A cloud covers the moon for a moment; it gets cold. Cortes does not say anything, just smiles, but shadows are floating in his eyes. He is tired, insomnia devours his nights. Just now, before they step ashore, the demon of sleep overwhelms him. He commands that a group of Haitians, Africans, and a gang of Spanish scum be gathered—gamblers and thieves from the brothels across the islands. After he gives orders, a few boats set sail, disappearing between the ships. Rude voices, shouts, curses in Spanish and other languages, growling, and faint giggling can be heard. Then all subsides into silence. Sparks flare up, balls of fire descend upon the sails. The wooden skeletons crack, sigh, limbs bend—charred bodies thrown into the ocean. A moment later, everything burns—*Santa Maria*, *Santa Anna*, *San Miguel*, and *San Antonio* are sent to hell. Six more ships follow—a triumphant procession towards the ashes. The sea is on fire.

When Cortes crosses the rocky hill, he finds three hundred men and thirteen horses, all silent under a devilish sky. The men grow pale under the vault of the night—an army of ghosts gazing upwards with melting eyes. Warriors until yesterday, inured to blood and injustice, they look like children now, scared of shadows. What have they lost? Why do they mourn the end of a world?

*Where is courage, where did bravery go?* Cortes thinks.

The firmament is painted in a bloody glow; the spheres of heaven are burning. The priest Domingo rises with his hands stretched up as if calling something or somebody—a martyr who will soon himself be swallowed by an abyss. Clouds like hungry dogs rip up heavens and stars. Aguilar has taken off his boots and sits on a stump off to the side. He chews on a piece of meat while observing the trees with their foggy crowns. When he sees Cortes, he stands up and takes a few steps. His hair shines. Grains of sand scattered by the wind tinge his face. A wandering star plows the expanse above him. He spits, and for a moment, everybody freezes, finding themselves in a strange silence. A silence whispering omens of fate in their hearts, face to face with the everlasting unknown. Then Aguilar says: “There you have your womb of wonders. There you have your inferno.” He looks around. The wind is whistling, the night is closing its fist. “These are the rocks where our flesh will rot. Look at the mountain. It knows one word only, and the word is death. Black is the soul of this land; black and hollow will your eyes turn.”

The men are silent and listen. Aguilar’s words bring back that frightening premonition that was haunting them in any case all along their voyage.

*Where are our unborn children? Who are the women we left behind caressing now? Is that why we lived—to die in misery? To turn into grinning skeletons in a strange land? No, there is no hope here, in this godforsaken land.*

“Enough, Pablo,” Cortes interrupts him.

“You burned the ships, you devil! You buried Spain; there is no turning back now,” Aguilar replies.

“No, there isn’t,” Cortes agrees. “No fresh bread, no mother’s hug, no warm bed, and sated belly. Nor any lover’s consolation, nor mutton and wine, nor home sweet home, nor a bell’s chime. And you will see your father’s home in dreams only. A sailor’s life is not easy; his days are made of bitter glory. But be proud, sons of Spain! And keep your eyes peeled. Fate did not call us here by chance. .

“We begin the climb in an hour. There is no home behind us; there is nothing. The only way is up,” he adds, pointing to the woods ahead. The ashes of the burnt

ships crumble from the sullen sky. The cold stings their skin. A few debris cut into the sand at the shore, thrown out by the waves. Nobody utters a word.

Soon the sun rises from the east, the ocean is sprinkled with a golden light. Black smoke drifts over the bushes. The men stare into the sea, in whose belly their boats are sinking and their sails are fading. Somewhere over there, on the other shore, are the harbors of the islands, illuminated by sun and seduction, with their prostitutes, beautiful Creoles, and Puerto Ricans, with the brothels, pubs, and cushiony pillows, with spicy food and mellow wine. Further away, beyond anything visible, beyond the night, Spain lies—naked, bloody, proud, touched by sun and God.

The azure starts glowing. The men head slowly up a steep path between the crags and the trunks of trees. Shortly they enter a vast forest. Once they cross its boundaries, they cannot escape the uneasy presence of leaves, grasses, and branches. They feel observed. They sense they are captives not only of their own anxiety but also of another's. Since they set foot here, they have been seized by inexplicable despair, as if exhaled by the earth itself. Unknown birds scream from the darkness. Everybody stares into the shadows around them, and in their minds, they curse their own destiny, curse the madman who left them with no road back, no home, no hope. As they advance, their hearts are filled with a vague fear, suspicion creeps into their chests. The day gradually declines, leaving space for the twilight; the twilight turns into blue dawn, the expedition goes on. They jump over roots, go round stones in odd shapes, a mist like yellow milk sticks to their feet, and right next to the ground, will-o'-the-wisps flicker mysteriously like pearls. Nobody touches them. It is still before noon, but everything starts growing darker, the veil of an ill-timed night falls. In a while, it gets so damp and stifling that the horses barely move, and the men are all covered in sweat. Sweat drops into eyes, dims vision, comes up in wet stains on shirts, makes mouths dry up in pain.

High above the peaks, a condor flies, its wings plow the azure, its gaze descends upon the world below: the cold ocean, the barely visible shoreline around the black mountain—massive, endless, exalted in the middle of the world. A lone navel—an eye staring ominously into the heavens.

Chapter 17  
**Witch Hunters**

E X C E R P T

*Hagabula.*

“The word just popped up in my mind. The sight resurrected an old memory. I read it years ago in the *Dictionary of Prohibited Arts*. I still see the words under the horrifying image—*chorus maleficarum*. The dance of the witches. I had heard about that demonic dance. In spring, they gathered at deserted places, held hands, and called the Devil for days. The picture showed them with their flesh falling off their bodies and with eyes on their breasts. But here they were, in front of me, and I hadn’t seen anything more beautiful. For a moment I forgot the horrible fate of the old man. I forgot his last words.”

Aguilar looks around, his gaze passes by the men’s faces. They understand that this is a look far beyond the desert, beyond them and everything familiar.

“No,” Salgado objects. “There is no dictionary of the witches’ tongue. No human words hold the keys to its secrets. This word is older than the world. The witches first learned it from the grass, read it in the moon’s rays, overheard it from the storm. Then they found it in themselves.”

The conquistadores turn their eyes towards him. They don’t say anything; they just listen. So he goes on: “Hagabula is nemesis. The many become one. The sun—night, the water—fire. The world turns. Hagabula is awakening, beginning. And coming back. This is what the despised and the voiceless carry unuttered within them. The oppressed, whose hope is blackened, repeat it without knowing. This is the sigh of the one whose rights were stolen, the sigh of the angry, of the one whose cry is a lone voice in the wilderness. Hagabula is war. That’s what the grass whispers, that’s what the wind and the leaves breathe, this is the word sung by the woods and the clouds. The slave will rise against the master, the hungry against the sated, the awake against the sleeping, the repulsed against the contented, the woman against the man, the weak against the powerful, the small against the big. The earth will renounce the sky, as will children renounce their parents, the tree the soil, the free the obedient, the nomad the home, the water the land, the wind the silence. Hagabula is a verb.”

Chapter 21  
**A Garden of Birds**

E X C E R P T

Sometimes the green horizon draws nearer, then suddenly pulls back and vanishes in the distance. Aguilar goes on with his story: “I was crossing the fields near Marburg when I ran into Baron Eulenbart’s procession. A flamboyant crowd of musicians, hunters, troubadours, acrobats, whores, sommeliers, astrologers, perfumers, and other attendants of unknown vocation. The long suite raised a terrific uproar so one knew from afar that it was approaching. The baron greeted me, then invited me to join them on the road to his castle. Eulenbart was famous for his garden of birds, which many would give their eyeteeth to see, even from a distance. In two days, the feast of birds was coming, and guests from all corners of Europe would arrive as they did every autumn. *I’d better not miss such an opportunity*, I thought—the nobility enjoyed sharing gossip, someone would have seen or heard something. Trace-hunting precedes headhunting, so I turned my horse and joined the carnival train at once.

“The baron’s garden was astounding. It was located inside a giant cage the size of a fortress, molded with exquisite ornaments and translucent nets, gold-plated and painted in bright colors. Filled with chirping, beating wings, and knocking beak, one could hear it long before the castle itself was in sight. Thunderbirds, larks, vultures, seagulls, blackbirds, sparrows, eagles, hawks, owlets, snipes, and grouses—Eulenbart had collected everything you can imagine in his garden. All the birds of the world, he said. There were birds with heads flat as shovels; birds crested and sac-like; others with eyes peeping from beneath their wings; birds chewing fire; birds speaking Portuguese; birds whose wings were pigmented by their dreams; and there were also those reciting verses known only to the ancient ornithologists.

“After a long walk in the garden that ended with loud cheers, the guests were invited to dinner in the mirror room. The dishes were already served, the wine sparkled in the glasses, laughter vibrated in the mirrors of which all the walls were made; then the last guest arrived. Countess de Muntuño hadn’t got out of her carriage yet when the whisper went around the table that she was coming for the baron’s most precious treasure. It was well known that he didn’t sell the birds from the garden. Over all these years, he hadn’t sold a single specimen. And his most precious acquisition he received in Persia. God knows what he

had given in return—he had traded his soul, many alleged. Eventually the baron had come back with a phoenix, which he kept under lock and key in a hidden crypt. The rumor claimed that under the castle, there was a whole labyrinth of such premises where Eulenbart kept those birds which he himself called *lone spirits* on account of their inability to live with anyone. Not other birds, nor with a human soul. And also because possessing them was illegal from Gibraltar to Petersburg. Harpies, demon birds, vampires, three-headed bats, dream-sucking birds, basilisks, black roosters, moon birds. This was the baron's secret garden. Somewhere there, the phoenix changed its skin once every autumnal equinox. Countess de Muntuño was coming for that skin and had prepared two chests full of doubloons for it, it was believed. Once fallen from the bird's body, the skin quickly turned into ashes, but this fact obviously didn't perturb the countess. The nobility spent lots of money on luxuries, so it didn't surprise anyone. Gold for ashes would, in any case, be the baron's best deal yet. The countess's reason only became known to me later."

## Chapter 24

### Giants

#### E X C E R P T

Regret and anger take hold of Cortes. He remembers his home, the Spanish streets bathed in sunshine. There is his mother, stretching out her arms, standing at the door of their home. He hears as if with his own ears the clamor at the market; his uncle's steps, going around the books; the song of the linen sheet, caressed by the wind. The cathedral of Salamanca, the bread, the stars—everything is shining. A world fitted into a palm, a heaven, warm and lucid as childhood.

*There is nothing beyond the end of the world. No gold, no eternal youth. Uncle Felipe was right. There are worlds that are not meant for us. Here I am now—alone in an enchanted mountain, surrounded by savages plotting my death. A ragged god covered in scales and dirty feathers. Instead of treasures—fruits and seeds; instead of wonders—peasants subjecting themselves to a king who spilled their children's blood. What was I thinking? Where are the sweet lips and wine to quench the heart? Where are the familiar words that taste like sun and sea? Where is Spain? Forgive me, Pablo. I am late. But there is still hope. Not Montezuma, but the mountain has to die. Whoever conquers the mountain conquers all. If we overcome it, we shall build a paradise. Instead of forests—wide roads made of stone; instead of*

*swamps—palaces; instead of grass—tobacco and sugar plantations; instead of deserts—windmills. We shall raise houses higher than cathedrals; we shall cut open the hidden veins of the earth; we shall build up harbors, markets, and barracks; we will master every river; we will dig; we will lay bricks; we will march forward. There will be no one to stop us—we will create wonders ourselves. We will build a future greater than all wonderful life. There are no limits for us—we will fly in the sky; we will ride underground; we'll make the night light up as bright as day. We are giants; let the world tremble—our deeds will give birth to a new heaven and a new earth. And every birdman, every Aztec and underground dweller, every living soul from this peak to the icy shores will bow down and shed sweat in the name of our paradise. The workshops will belch fumes night and day; towers made of glass will glitter; machines will be our weapons. We won't dig for gold in the dirt; we won't be chasing treasures—money will run to us of its own accord. We shall be richer and happier than gods.*

When the sun sets again the Aztecs lay down under the thick shadows of the redwoods. Nobody wants to walk anymore. Later the men gather around the rock and talk loudly, their words are sharp as thorns, long as seaweed. They quarrel, shout, argue. They turn their eyes towards the Spaniard, waving their fists. Hernan takes off the cloak made of serpent skin, tears off the feathers—revealing beneath it his shirt that was once black in accordance with the Burgundy fashion, now greyish and soaked in the scents of beer, perfume, and kisses.

“To hell with the mountain! Long live Spain; long live the builders of the future paradise! Bless us, God! Let us exalt over this earth,” Cortes cries, sneaking between the trees and sprinkling around the little bit of gunpowder he kept under his shirt. He moves in the dark like a shadow, drawing a circle of fire, cursing the Aztecs, the mountain, the ocean, the redwoods, the alien sky, and the warriors sleeping nearby. He is holding a stone in his palm—round and misty like a blind man's eye. The flintstone glides quickly over the knife blade, a spark flares up, and the dry twigs light up. The crown of the giant redwood is burning. The fire rushes over to the neighboring branches, jumps from tree to tree, climbs down the stems. The foliage and the scorched grass hiss, whispering unhuman secrets. The fire devours the forest, the charred bodies of the redwoods crumble in endless ashes. A black wound is yawning in the mountain—its smoke rises up, covering the firmament, making the peak disappear. Only the screams of the burning Aztecs drift over the ashes.





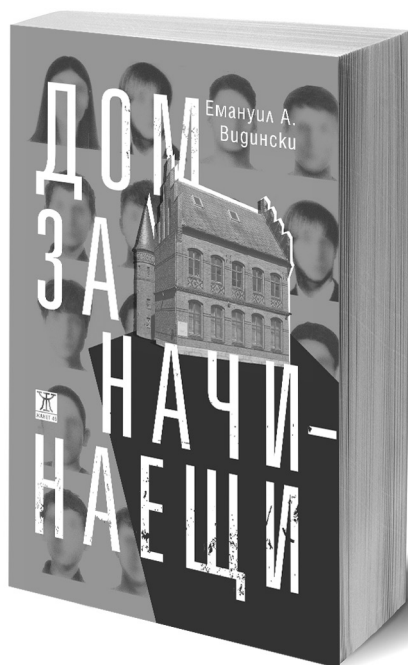
# Emanuel A. VIDINSKI

## *Home for Beginners*

Emanuel A. Vidinski (b. 1978) made his literary debut in 2005 with the short story collection *Cartographies of Escape*, followed by the novel *Breathing Rooms* (2008), the poetry collection *Par Avion* (2011), and the short story collection *Egon and the Silence* (2015). His second novel *Home for Beginners* was published in 2023. From 2008 to 2012, Vidinski worked at the Bulgarian department of Deutsche Welle Radio in Bonn. After returning to Sofia, he served as editor-in-chief of *Panorama* from 2013 to 2016, taught creative writing from 2016 to 2018, and in September 2019, he became an editor at *Literaturen Vestnik* (Literary Newspaper). Under his editorship, an anthology of short stories by contemporary Bulgarian writers, *Ein Fremder Freund* (A Foreign Friend) was published by the German publisher Eta Verlag in 2017.

## Summary

Emanuil A. Vidinski's *Home for Beginners* is a novel about the traumas and joys of growing up; about a Bulgarian boy's life in a Catholic children's home in Germany in the early 1990s—a home where all the children are beginners: in life, in discovering the world and their own identity, in friendship, and in seeking answers to the many questions of youth. In the Home, resembling a small castle and pulsing with its own rhythm, the protagonist confronts his own imperfections, experiences love for the first time, and learns to dream in a foreign language. Ultimately, this is a novel about moving into an unfamiliar language with the weight and lightness of one's own. About coming into one's own and about the unique journey through the rooms of growing up. About freedom as a home for beginners, where the only sure thing is the lack of it.



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EXCERPT FROM

## *Home for Beginners*

by Emanuil Vidinski

*Translated by Izidora Angel*

I took the bus back to Bulgaria twice a year. Once for the summer and again for the Christmas holidays. The German students had no more than a month and a half off during the summer, or as they liked to refer to it—six weeks. After I arrived in Germany and spent the first six months of '91 with my father in Halle, I left for Sofia at the end of June. On its return trip from Bulgaria the bus was running thirteen hours late. It took ten hours just to cross the Hungary-Yugoslavia border. A short, middle-aged man sat next to me, pestering me to buy him beer from the bus driver, after which he would take off his shoes because beer apparently made his feet swell up. The bus was stuck in a line of hundreds of cars and buses, so we got off to stretch our legs in the field. Time simply did not pass. I knew that my father would be waiting at the train station in Dresden, but there was no way to reach him and let him know about the delay. When the bus moved, no one even got on because we already knew it would be stopping again in just a couple of meters, which we could simply walk. Some people began to worry they'd run out of food, others seemed resigned to it, a third group stayed angry. My seatmate continued drinking beer and making trips to the toilet. When it got dark out, he got off the bus and relieved himself outside. The drivers had stopped closing the doors. We'd move a few meters and stop again. For ten hours. By the time we actually made it to Dresden, the delay had grown from ten to thirteen hours.

We arrived in the early hours of the morning. As with any time I traveled solo, I became slightly on edge. Or mobilized. I never was a carefree traveler. It was an interesting mix of anxiety and enthusiasm. The bus stopped at the *Hauptbahnhof*, I got my duffle bag and looked around. My father wasn't there. He didn't show up in the next twenty minutes either. The bus drove out of the parking lot, the passengers which had disembarked it left, I sat and waited. I felt myself tense up and sheepishly looked around. Every passing person felt to me like a potential threat. Finally I decided there was no point in waiting outside; I found my large

duffle bag and entered the train station. I knew what I should do: I'd seen my father do it more than once when he took me to museums, a small ancient town or some castle in the area. The train schedules in Germany were yellow and hung everywhere around the stations. I found one, saw when the next scheduled train to Halle would be and went to buy a ticket. But the ticket booths were still closed, and it was nearly two hours until the next train. I worriedly looked around for a place to hide or at least feel safe. I saw a food cart selling coffee and sandwiches. I walked over to it and put the duffle bag down. I stood, rocking slightly, and cast furtive glances around me. I wanted to put my Walkman headphones on, but I wouldn't be able to hear if someone approached me. So I kept burrowing in my coat, got startled from time to time and kept looking around. To the left of me I saw a well-lit space with the red cross above the main entrance, and two women bustling around a man who was sitting with his back to me. I wondered whether I should go in there and explain my situation, but the women were dressed in white aprons, everything resembled a hospital so I decided to stay put. But time stood still, it was cold, and my father was nowhere to be seen. I kept myself entertained by watching people come up to buy something at the stand. Most looked homeless or at the least of a lower social standing. A large, mustached German man stood at the register, his thunderous voice echoing in the empty train station and every time he said anything it sounded like a small detonation going off. I had the feeling that he used his voice to let customers know they needed to be timid and well behaved because he was a big and scary mustached German man who would put in their place anyone who dared disrupt the order and the bon ton, and at the same time, it was clear he wanted to let everyone in the vicinity know he was helping a customer and get their attention. Only there were more shadows at the train station than sentient beings. Not counting the pigeons, of course. Drawn by a penchant for fantasy, I imagined how that same German man went home for lunch every day and, having left his work voice at the stand, spoke to his wife in the softest, most caressing tone. I looked to the red cross space once again. No change there. But this time something clawed at me. I looked toward the two women again, then I looked at the same man sitting with his back to me and in that instant realized it was my father.

I quickly picked up my duffle bag and went towards the door. I opened it, went through and explained to the woman who approached me that I was "this man's son."

She blinked, looked towards my father, then waved for me to follow her.

"Your son..." she said.

I didn't wait for a reaction, I walked around and sat on the other side of the table, across from him. I put the duffle bag down. My father looked at me and for a moment became frightened. I'll never forget his eyes. They were hollow, squinted from fatigue and worry, and they'd almost lost their color. He looked at me for a few seconds then attempted a smile. He didn't say anything. He reached across the table and put his hand on mine. He stared at both our hands and stayed that way for what seemed like a really long time. I was split by the happiness I felt at having found each other and my uneasiness at the whole scene.

He told me that starting the following week I would move to the Catholic children's home in another town and attend high school, and all that would teach me to be more independent. He could see, he said, that I was making no real progress with my German, so he'd made the decision to separate us and immerse me fully in the German tongue. Besides, he added, we lived on the stipend he received as a PhD student at the Halle University and that wasn't much.

His voice was even, it came out in a slight rasp, almost a whisper, and the whole time I felt as though my father wasn't connected to what he was saying, like he'd pressed a button and a mechanical voice was delivering a pre-recorded text. His eyes were still very fatigued, almost detached.

I didn't know what to say or what to think regarding the news he'd greeted me with. I'd discovered, of course, that my father had fallen into Catholicism, despite his never speaking of the fact. He probably thought that a Catholic upbringing would give me the sorts of advantages he had been deprived of in Socialist Bulgaria. I'm not entirely sure.

Either way, within an hour we were on the train to Halle. My father had bought me a ticket. I sat in the compartment and watched Dresden slowly slip by through the frame of the window, I let out a deep sigh, and in that moment felt hellishly tired. I turned towards my father who was sitting opposite me and hadn't stopped looking at me. He tried to smile. I smiled back. And I slowly closed my eyes.

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My father and I arrived on a Saturday in the middle of August, 1991. We boarded the train to Halle and disembarked less than an hour later at a tiny provincial train station. There were two platforms in all, a waiting room and an adjacent restaurant. People lived above the restaurant, at least that's what I thought as I scanned my surroundings, waiting to get picked up by someone from the Home.

That someone turned out to be Berndt. In the silence that followed the train's departure, we caught the Wartburg's distant flutter. We were lingering inside the waiting room indecisively when Berndt flew in panting, quickly ran over to us, apologized for his tardiness, grabbed my suitcase and, as he walked to the car, breathless explained to my father: "The Home is made up of several groups, four to be precise. Each group has two educators during the day and one after six o'clock. Two of our groups are families, although we do try to form familial habits in all our children."

The Wartburg was parked outside the entrance, between two giant trees. I looked up at their crowns, which rustled from the gentle breeze. All around us reigned a supreme calmness. There were no other passengers, nor any other people. I sat in the back seat, Berndt put the car in first, and the inimitable fluttering of the Wartburg became the soundtrack to our departure. As he and my father chatted in the front seat, I looked out at the summer night through the car window and couldn't set my mind on what exactly I should be thinking about. I was excited, scared, and at the time, impatient to discover what was waiting for me. I imagined that I was the main character in a film being left in a home for problem children, despite the fact I was not a problem child. What was waiting for me there?

"I'd like to know whether you have a practice of corporal punishment." I heard my father say.

"No, physical abuse is explicitly forbidden. This includes even slapping. Don't worry. It's actually harder to keep the kids themselves away from each other, but I think that we're doing well, considering."

Berndt sounded sure of himself, good-natured, despite the fact that, in a few years, he would be the one to break this ban. But for now, his words, as far as I could understand them, were reassuring.

We entered the small town, and I gaped curiously at the houses. They all looked identical, each no more than four stories. There were apartment buildings, too, also four to five stories high. I saw many people riding their bikes, one man even did it while running his dog, a bulldog. The dog ran with ease next to the bicycle, tongue hanging out, eyes straight ahead—the two were in complete synchronicity. I wanted to yell for my dad to look, but he was still deep in conversation with Berndt, and I could tell by the look on his face that the question portion wasn't over.

"You said something about familial habits..."

"Familial habits, yes. Our groups are small, six to eight kids each, no more than two a room, and we have single rooms too. There's a kitchen, living room,

two bathrooms. The kids have two mandatory chores per week—cooking dinner for the whole group and cleaning the bathroom, or the living room, or another space.”

“Cooking dinner?” I heard myself ask from the back seat.

“Yes, a cold dinner. I should have clarified...” Berndt yelled over the Wartburg and turned for a second or two to shoot words out towards me over his shoulder. “Setting the table, slicing the bread, taking the things out of the fridge. After dinner’s over, putting everything away, washing the dishes, drying the dishes, things like that.”

“Drying the dishes?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t dishes dry by themselves?”

“Maybe, but they’d get dusty and besides, when water drops dry they leave stains.”

I was impressed. Drying dishes to rid them of water stains. We were off to a good start.

“The idea behind the Home isn’t to cram ten kids into a single living space, but to be like one big family.”

“I see.” My father had his arms crossed over his eternal backpack, which sat perched on his knees. “How far away is the school?”

“They told me you stopped attending high school, is that right?”

“That’s right.”

“I wanted to talk to you about that. Are you sure that’s what you want to do? There’s a lot more learning there, mastering the language is a requirement...”

“I’m aware, but my son learned a lot in just a few months, and besides, at his age he’ll be speaking German better than me by Christmas.”

“Okay, I just wanted to make sure.”

“Kids at this age, especially if they’re immersed in a foreign language, are like mushrooms. They absorb everything.”

*Easy for you to say, I thought, easy for you. You’re leaving me in some home, with strangers, where I don’t even speak the language, and you don’t give a crap.* I wanted to be madder than I actually was. For some reason I really wanted to convince myself of my indignation at my father sending me to such a place, but I couldn’t quite succeed. True, I was terrified, but I was also overstimulated by the whole adventure. I did already speak some German, even if it was with a heavy accent, limited vocabulary and bad syntax. The language wasn’t my biggest worry, which was strange, but I just wasn’t too worried about it. I was

relaxed and tense simultaneously, scared and thrilled, with a sinking heart and curious eyes.

At some point the car came up to a high brick wall. Berndt slowed down after a few seconds, signaled right, and we entered the front yard, which the brick wall enclosed. On the left there was a large church, on the right stood something like a small palace or at least that's what it looked like. Between the two buildings, bathed in the evening sun, stood tall trees. Berndt parked and walked us to the entrance of the building on the right. Wide halls and a staircase that led up to a tower.

"This will be your room," he said as he opened a door off a small side hallway. "It's a double but you'll be alone for now."

"For how long?" I asked.

"I can't say, but another kid will come for sure, and if we think you'll be a good fit, we'll have him move in with you."

I nodded and looked around the room. Two tall windows let in an abundance of light, which I immediately liked.

"If you need anything, you can come to me or one of the other teachers, we'll discuss it, and could potentially get it for you."

"Really? Like what?"

"Well, the home is big, there's all sorts of furniture in the other rooms, we can have a look at what's available and let you pick something." Berndt looked at his watch. "I think it's time I took your father back to the station, so he doesn't miss his train. I'll leave you two for a bit, and I'll wait for you out in the yard in ten minutes."

"Thank you," my father said.

"By the way, we have bedtime rules. You're thirteen, right?"

"Yes."

"Bedtime is at nine."

"Nine?" I gaped.

"Nine!"

"But that's way too early."

"Those are the rules." Berndt shrugged.

"Can it at least be nine-thirty?"

"No point in haggling. Nine-thirty when you turn fourteen."

My father put a hand on my shoulder, and I shut up. Berndt left the room.

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The home had the uncanny ability to harbor perennial change as it simultaneously remained unchanging. Dozens of children and teachers, kitchen and laundry helpers, drivers and others had come and gone over the years. Some left an impression in your mind, others didn't. When certain people left, it was a relief (Kristina), others I missed for months (Berndt). The Bean wasn't someone who enraptured you. Extremes simply weren't part of his natural makeup. Not overt happiness or overt sadness or overt passion or even cold rationality. He was interested in humanity and found it through temperateness rather than excess. He showed understanding towards the escalation of every emotion because he took it to be a natural part of the human condition, but I think that for him the essence of people was found in the ordinariness of everyday life, that place where everyone sought to find himself. He wasn't a person you'd miss, someone who brought a unique specificity, which, when removed, left a void inside of you. We were all far too convinced of this, and we were wrong.

There was only one time I spoke to him about something outside the Home, our group or our daily routine. I don't recall a single conversation regarding personal matters, because even in moments of tenderness he remained the teacher and we the children. He was kind, accommodating, caring, but he remained on the other side.

One night in the kitchen, while I set the table and took things out of the refrigerator, I asked him if there was a band he'd been a fan of in his youth (the question itself contained the assertion that had there been, it would have occurred in the past). To which he responded, as he helped me with the silverware: "Of course."

"Which one?" I insisted.

He stopped, put down the handful of forks he'd just taken out of the drawer, and began drumming on the counter and softly humming: "Riders on ze storm, tut-tududu..." His face changed, he went somewhere far away, traveled back through the years and for a few short seconds, underneath the mustache, the badly chosen horn-rimmed glasses, the boring haircut and the ordinary features of his face, I managed to get a glimpse of a young Frank, someone who wasn't yet the Bean, someone with long hair, strong convictions, an unshakable faith in God and yet nevertheless with a desire, besides to be useful and live according to the laws of nobleness and goodness, to experience pleasure as well, to take time to taste life's sweetness, without that being a gateway to something bigger, just the end goal of a certain moment, beyond which nothing else was necessary.

The moment lasted a few seconds, after which everything returned to normal. The table was set, the Bean told me to go call the others to dinner. He did that while putting the napkins down next to each plate, lost in his duties. I looked at him: it seemed as if his face had been forever deserted by the emotions written on it while he hummed *The Doors*. To such an extent that I began to doubt whether I'd really noticed them or if I'd made them up.

The Bean left one Sunday. He packed what little belongings he had in the family station wagon, and we stood at the entrance, trying to help, but every last one of us was confused by the ambiguity of our feelings. We weren't sad, yet we already missed him. It wasn't hurt we felt but nostalgia. We acknowledged the fact that in his own imperceptible way, the Bean was the pillar of our group, one of the longest-serving employees at the Home. Nobody ever thought of him after he left, but at the same time we all expected him to appear when we needed him, ready to help us, do us a favor or defend us from some wayward decision by Zeeman, the Home's director, who occasionally exploded with completely stupid ideas (like the time he forbid television except for four hours on Sundays). Not one of us shed a tear on that Sunday while we helped the Bean by carrying his boxes, suitcases, reading lamps and the rest of his odds and ends and then watched as he loaded everything up in his car. We had the mournful faces of someone with a stomachache. Our movements were listless and lacked motivation. After the car had been loaded up, the Bean said: "Soooo..." he flung out his arms, his mustache lifted in an attempt to express a well-I-guess-that's-all type of face, after which he rubbed his palms together, said "Let's keep in touch," as he sat in the driver's seat, then we heard the motor roar, waved weakly and, still slightly baffled by the newfound void, scattered in the yard.





# Translators

**Izidora Angel** is a Bulgarian-born writer and literary translator in Chicago. She's the author of two book-length translations and an NEA grant recipient for her third, Yordanka Beleva's *Keder*. Izidora's writing has been featured in *Astra Magazine*, *Electric Literature*, *Two Lines*, *Chicago Reader*, and is forthcoming in Deep Vellum's inaugural *Best Literature in Translation 2024*. Her work has been recognized by English PEN, Art Omi, Bread Loaf, the Rona Jaffe Foundation, and others. Izidora is a 2023 Elizabeth Kostova Foundation Fellow for her in-progress memoir.

**Christopher Buxton** is the author of four novels published in Bulgaria by Znatsi: *Far from the Danube*, *The Return*, *The Devil's Notebook* and *The Curse of Undying Dreams*. His published prose translations include: Rumen Balabanov's *Ragiad* (Dalkey Press, 2013); Izabella Shopova's *East in Eden* (Inkwater Press, 2015); Alek Popov's *Mission London* (edited, Istros 2014); and Kerana Angelova's *The Interior Room* (Accents 2017). He has had four anthologies of translations of classic Bulgarian poetry published, and his work has appeared in various magazines. He regularly translates for the European Prize for Literature and he has just completed the translation of *To Essay* by Rusana Burdarska, which will be published in the US with support from the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation. See [www.christopherbuxton.com](http://www.christopherbuxton.com)

**Gergana Galabova** has a BA in English with Creative Writing from Goldsmiths, University of London, and an MA in Editing and Translation from Sofia University. Her work has been published in literary newspapers *Literary Journal* and *Evolution*, as well as the anthologies *Try This* and *Love for Advanced Readers*. In 2021 she won the Grand Prize at the 43rd National Student Literary Competition Boyan Penev and in 2022 her debut short story anthology *Water for Gazing* was published. She's the editor-in-chief of the online cultural edition [artakcia.bg](http://artakcia.bg).

**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*, *91<sup>st</sup> 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.

**Lora Petrova** is a translator and interpreter from Bulgaria. She holds a degree in Linguistics from New Bulgarian University, where she co-launched a translators' club for students in the linguistics department. Her translations have been published in *Asymptote Journal*; *The Oceans of the Mind*, the semiotics journals of the South-East European Center for Semiotic Studies; and in *Bulgarian Jews: Living History* (Shalom Bulgaria, 2018).

**Tom Phillips** is a UK-born writer and translator living in Sofia. His translations of contemporary Bulgarian literature have been widely published in journals and anthologies while the full-length volume *Geo Milev: Poems and Prose Poems* is due from Worpel Press in early 2024. Other publications include *Unknown Translations* (Scalino, 2016)—a bilingual volume of poems he originally wrote in Bulgarian and subsequently translated into English—and the English-language poetry collections *Recreation Ground* (TRP, 2012) and *Burning Omaha* (Firewater, 2003). He has a degree in English from the University of Cambridge and a PhD in creative writing from the University of Reading and currently teaches creative writing and translation at Sofia University St Kliment Ohridski.

**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; nine 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 Georgi Gospodinov's novel *Time Shelter* won the 2023 International Booker Prize.

**Traci Speed** is an American who became interested in Bulgaria and its language after a trip to Bulgaria in 1990. She had previously studied Russian and began her formal study of Bulgarian while earning her PhD in Slavic Linguistics from the University of California, Berkeley, where she focused on South Slavic languages, language contact, and the Balkan Sprachbund. She also became involved in the lively Balkan music and dance community in the San Francisco Bay Area, and she still enjoys participating in Bulgarian folk dancing. After going to Shumen, Bulgaria, on a Fulbright research grant in 2017, she stayed in Bulgaria, where she now teaches translation at Sofia University. In addition to translating Bulgarian literature, she also works for several art museums in the country, translating catalogs and exhibition materials.

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