

# Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2020

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## Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2020

*Ten Books from Bulgaria*





National  
Culture Fund  
Bulgaria

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

# Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2020

*Ten Books from Bulgaria*

Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2020: *Ten Books from Bulgaria*  
National Book Centre Catalogue/Anthology

**Editorial Selection/Guest Editors:** Prof. Ameliya Licheva, PhD; Assoc. Prof. Dariya Karapetkova, PhD; Prof. Milena Kirova, PhD; Mitko Novkov, PhD; and Todora Radeva, members of the Expert Council of the National Book Centre at the National Palace of Culture – Congress Centre Sofia

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NATIONAL  
PALACE OF CULTURE  
CONGRESS CENTRE  
SOFIA



NATIONAL  
**BOOK CENTRE**

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Contemporary  
Bulgarian  
Prose 2020

## About the Publisher



ANGEL MITEV  
Executive Director  
*National Palace of Culture –  
Congress Centre Sofia*  
Republic of Bulgaria

## Preface

Dear READER,

One lifetime is too short – since one cannot even begin to imagine having the time to read all the great classic books the world has known, then picking the best titles in the vast ocean of contemporary global literature is an even more vital, challenging and weighty task for anyone – whether a literary professional or just an admirer of literature.

Please take a quick pause and ask yourself a few questions. How much do you know about contemporary literature from Bulgaria? How many Bulgarian writers and book titles could you name at all? Have you ever had a chance to get a glimpse at their works? Would you like to read a book from a Bulgarian writer, publish Bulgarian literature, recommend a Bulgarian book to a friend, and advocate for the translation and promotion of Bulgarian literature into other languages?

In fact, there has been a positive shift over the past two decades, and you might have already had a chance to become acquainted with some representatives of contemporary Bulgarian literature. The National Book Centre at the National Palace of Culture – Congress Centre Sofia has put together this small book, not only a catalogue but also an anthology, to help you navigate your literary quest and to make your further introduction to contemporary Bulgarian literature easier and more enjoyable.

Here you can get a taste of ten titles from female and male contemporary Bulgarian writers, published in their original language within the scope of the current and the previous year (2020-2019), presented here in superb English translation.

We consider them masterful, witty, and intriguing. We hope you will share our opinion.

I would not like to steal any more of your precious time in your quest for good literature. Enjoy reading the following pages and if you ever visit Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, be sure to stop by Peroto (The Quill) Literary Club at the National Palace of Culture – a welcoming and cozy space for book lovers and literary explorers.

## NATIONAL PALACE OF CULTURE

The National Palace of Culture – Congress Centre Sofia (known in short as the “National Palace of Culture”) is one of the largest multi-purpose venues in Southeastern Europe. Opened in 1981, the National Palace of Culture is designed to host a wide range of events, such as international congresses, official meetings, conferences, international conventions, summits, exhibitions, festivals, concerts and other cultural events. The National Palace of Culture houses a rich variety of the most distinguished Bulgarian collections of visual art designed by some of the country’s most prominent artists. These monumental works are integrated into the conceptual architecture and design of the building.

Currently, the National Palace of Culture seeks to give new dynamics to its environment by establishing diverse contemporary art spaces that are meant to shape Sofia’s cultural life. In 2018, the National Palace of Culture hosted the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

## NATIONAL BOOK CENTRE

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

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

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

The National Book Centre at the National Palace of Culture works in 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).

## *Ten Books from Bulgaria*



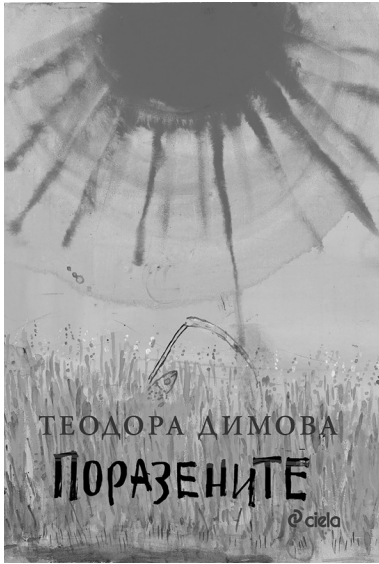
### **DIMOVA, Teodora**

**Teodora Dimova** is among the most prominent and widely read Bulgarian writers. She is the author of nine plays, staged in Bulgaria and abroad. She has written the novels *Emine*, *Mothers*, *Adriana*, *Marma*, *Mariam* and *The Train to Emmaus*. In 2007, *Mothers* won the Bank Austria and KulturKontakt's major award for literary works from Southeastern Europe. The book has gone through eleven reprintings in Bulgaria and has been published in nine languages, including German, French, Russian, Polish, Hungarian, and Slovene, among others. *Adriana* has been translated in French and Czech, and the novel was made into the movie *I Am You*. In 2010, *Marma*, *Mariam* won the National Hristo G. Danov Award for Bulgarian literature. In 2014, *The Train to Emmaus* received the *Culture Portal* Literature Award. In 2019, Teodora Dimova was named the recipient of the National Hristo G. Danov Award for her overall contribution to Bulgarian literature and literacy. In 2019, she published her novel *The Stricken*, which won the 2020 Novel of the Year Award of the 13 Centuries Bulgaria National Endowment Fund.

Since 2012, she has served as a columnist at the *Culture Portal*. Her essays have been published in the collections *Four Kinds of Love*, *Lessons*, and *Call the Sheep by Name*.

## THE STRICKEN

### SYNOPSIS



*The Stricken* by Theodora Dimova tells of the difficult fates of three women and one child who lived through the nightmare of the September 9, 1944, coup that brought the communists to power in Bulgaria with the help of the Soviet Red Army. Three months later the so-called People's Court was created to judge the actions of those guilty for the "National Catastrophe" Bulgaria suffered after the Second World War. A grandstanding tragicomic parody of a court whose true goal was to destroy Bulgaria's elite and replace it with Moscow's pawns who were loyal to the communist regime. Nearly 30000 people were sentenced to death, arrested, beaten or disappeared without a trace in the first few months after September 9, 1944.

Women, whose husbands and father were killed, and who are walking in the ice-cold February morning towards the site of the murders. Snow is falling. The women do not speak. They resemble the black-clad Myrrhbearers, but they are not here to share joyful news, instead to see the crater where the bodies of their loved ones have been covered in slag. The snow does not stick on top of that black circle. It melts. Everything around is white, only the circle remains black.

The novel consists of four parts, each of them narrated from one of the women's point of view. The first described the fate of a writer, publisher and intellectual who was arrested in the first days after the coup. His wife Rayna warns him many times that they should leave Bulgaria so as to flee from the impending danger that she intuitively senses is threatening them. But he won't hear a word of becoming an emigrant in a foreign country. The new government's reign of terror is unleashed in the very first days after the coup. Journalists, doctors, engineers and intellectuals disappear without a trace. Nikola and Rayna cannot believe the sinister news, Nikola continues to believe that they are only rumors. Until one night he, too, is arrested. In jail they beat him mercilessly. Rayna will do anything to save him. Even to become the mistress of his torturer.

The second part is Ekaterina's story. She is the wife of a priest, they have three children. Father Mina is also arrested and ends up in the same cell as Nikola. He is also sentenced to death. Ekaterina and her sons are resettled to a small town in the

provinces. The living conditions there are unbearable. Ekaterina falls ill. In her final months she writes a letter to her children, which they are to read when they grow up.

The third part tells the story of Victoria, a prominent and talented pianist who graduated from the Music Academy in Paris. After the coup, she and her daughter are resettled to the provinces, where she faces inhumane conditions while working in a brick factory, which causes her to turn to drinking. Her husband, the girl's father, Boris is also in the same cell with Nikola and Father Mina. He is shot along with them on the same night of the executions.

The prisoners are taken from jail and driven close to the Armenian Church at the cemetery near Sofia. There is an enormous crater there from a bomb. The convicts are shot on the rim of the crater so that their bodies fall directly into it. After that the corpses are covered with dirt and slag. During the night it has begun to snow. All the paths and graves turn white, hidden beneath the snow. Yet the snow refuses to stick over the slag-covered crater. It melts from the warmth of the not-yet-cold bodies.

At the end of the night of the mass executions, the women and loved ones are walking down the pathways of the cemetery. Rayna, Ekaterina and Victoria are among them. It is unclear how they have come to know about the mass grave. They gather silently around it. They light candles and whisper prayers. This is the wake and funeral for the murdered victims.

The fourth part is the story of the child Alexandra, who was born twenty years later, the granddaughter of the narrator from the first part, Rayna. The communist 1960s as seen through the eyes of a child who is burdened by the history of her family, whose members have been labelled "enemies of the people." Alexandra gradually, step by step uncovers the deep secrets her family has been keeping, she puts together the puzzle of her father's sudden death, her lost mother, her senile grandmother who took care of her and from time to time took her to the small village of Bolyarovo near Sofia, where she showed her their former villa, now confiscated by the "people's" government, as well as the house of Father Mina, and the house of the once-famous and now-forgotten writer Nikola Todorov, which have also been "nationalized" and taken from their owners.

Novel, 249 pages

ISBN: 9789542829577

Ciela Norma, 2019

2020 Novel of the Year Award from the 13 Centuries of Bulgaria National Endowment Fund  
Signed contract with Editions des Syrtes Press for publication of the novel in France in 2021

Interest for publication in Poland



## EXCERPT

*translated from the Bulgarian by Diana Stoykova*

*edited by Traci Speed and Angela Rodel*

Over the next two weeks Rayna and Nikola were sucked into a hurricane of events and news of which, in the beginning, it was hard to discern the reality. Soviet troops, working with the local communist organizations, occupied the most grand and prominent houses in the towns and villages and confiscated food supplies. The partisans, until recently wanted by the police for antigovernment activity, were now coming down from the mountains and were being appointed to leading roles at the local committees of the Fatherland Front, coordinated by a unified center. The regional heads were quickly replaced. There was an internal order to remove the requirements for educational and work qualifications for the district and municipal governors. As soon as the new government was installed, the Ministry of Internal Affairs sacked more than thirty thousand people and hired new employees, loyal to the Fatherland Front. The police was renamed the People's Militia, which included pardoned political and common criminals, partisans and members of the Communist Youth League, and their uniforms were changed. But Nikola and Rayna saw with their own eyes how, out of nowhere, on top of all state buildings and blocks of flats, red flags appeared. People were forced to stand at demonstrations for hours on end in support of the Red Army. Political agitators spread among the population and demanded that they show up at daily demonstrations in support of the power of the people. If a person refused to go to the demonstration, they would find a neighbor to report that person, who would immediately be labeled an enemy of the state. Rayna was dumbstruck with concealed horror, but on the outside she pretended that what was going on out there had nothing to do with them. Nikola lost his usual liveliness, that sense of jauntiness and lightness about him was gone, and dark circles appeared under his eyes; the magazine kept being published as it had always been, but he was fully aware that this wouldn't go on for long. Stupefying rumors about people disappearing started to emerge, along with rumors about mass shootings and inhumane tortures. Special shock troops of the national militia were said to have been formed, calling themselves inside or executive trios, and the Minister of Internal Affairs personally supplied them with huge amounts of weaponry from the state stockpile, so that the new government could deal with pro-fascist and reactionary elements. All of Rayna and Nikola's acquaintances were suddenly turning out to be pro-fascist and reactionary elements. One morning the

fence around Father Mina's house dawned to the red-painted sign "Jesus Fascist". In Kuystendil, where Kula was from, the chief of the district police was captured, then pulled apart by two horses driven in opposite directions. This is utter nonsense, Nikola laughed when Rayna told him the story one evening, in a low voice, so that the children couldn't hear. And in a village near Targovishte, Rayna kept on whispering, where our milk woman is from, the one who brings us milk each morning, fifty people were locked up in the local school, and then, during the night, eight of them – the lawyer, the priest, the doctor, the reserve colonel, the teacher – were loaded onto a small truck and driven to some remote wilderness, then a cord with a lit flashlight was hung on their necks and they were ordered to start walking in the dark, in the night, they were stumbling, falling down, hitting stones, there was no moon, it was pitch-dark. Then the ones who brought them started shooting at the flickering moving lights of the flashlights. They were having fun, counting how many of them everyone would hit. They were arguing, laughing, betting, and taking turns with the bottle of rakia that one of them had brought. I can't listen to the milk woman's tasteless, made-up crap, Nikola interrupted her abruptly and grimly, exasperated by these old wives' tales. I'm exasperated by these old wives' tales, he said again, more abruptly and snappishly, and slammed the bedroom door, then the outside door, and he left without saying goodbye, without saying where he was going. Rayna burst into tears, then remembered she could go on the balcony and see what direction he was heading in, and she watched him walking abruptly and swiftly and cried even harder. Two hours later Nikola came back, and she looked at him silently; I was wandering around, Rayna, just wandering around, and then I met a fellow who gave me this article, read it, Nikola said in a low cracked voice. Rayna took the newspaper with a timid gesture.

Here, read here, he pointed to a paragraph, read it out loud, Nikola said, and she started reading, and it was as if she gradually lost the ability to make sense of the letters, almost stuttering: "...corrupt journalists, artists, writers, literary critics, having sold themselves for huge amounts of money to the enemies of the state, inciting the murderers, praising their blood-stained deeds, and ruthlessly defaming the honest defenders of the people. The People have not forgotten what they've written and know exactly where they are and who they are. And these particular people are trying to hide in vain. The People will judge them as intellectual instigators and murderers, as mercenaries and enemies of the state." Shrieks flew in from Siya and Teodor's room – they had once again started fighting over one of Teodor's favorite tin soldiers. Siya loved to take them from him and hide them, and then not tell him where she'd put them, and he'd have to find them by himself; this

amused her so much that she would roar with laughter at her mischief until she'd get a kick in the ankles and start screaming bloody murder, so that her mother would think she was the victim and save her from her brother's attempts at revenge. Now Rayna and Nikola were sitting transfixed and didn't notice Siya's upset crying. She burst into their room and at the sight of them stopped crying abruptly. She looked in astonishment first at one of them, then at the other, and then she went to her father and embraced him. He lifted her up and put her on his knee, bouncing her like a pony. How do horses trot, Siya, he asked her, and without waiting for the reply, he started bouncing her even more vigorously and imitating the sound of horse hooves clopping rhythmically on the pavement. But for some reason this dispirited jest did not appeal to Siya at all, and she slipped off of her father's knee and rushed out of the room.

Each morning Nikola would go to the Writers' Café, as it was the only place where he could attain some credible information. With each day passing it was becoming more and more evident that what was being broadcast on the radio and written in the newly emerged official gazettes had nothing to do with reality. Rumor had it that each day two unknown men with brown leather jackets and flat caps would enter the café without speaking to each other, would sullenly examine the visitors from under their visors, exchanging looks and nodding slightly to each other when a certain more noteworthy person would come in. They looked like secret agents or thugs and left the oppressive feeling that the visitors were guilty of something. A rumor was spreading about a secret cryptogram from Moscow ordering the elimination of the fascist intellectuals; the rumor went on that there already was a list with all the names from the cultural delegation to Germany in 1940 on it, all of them accused of being pro-fascist elements and enemies of the state. But these are only rumors, aren't they, Rayna asked, her eyes wide. There were about thirty of you, all of you writers, artists, painters. Of course, these are just rumors. You know our fellow Bulgarians, they love spreading rumors, that's when they're at their best, Nikola answered. Besides, how come this cryptogram is so secret and yet everybody knows about it, all of Sofia already knows whose names are on this list and so we're just waiting for them to come and arrest us, he added convincingly, and this undeniable argument was left drifting in Rayna's mind throughout the rest of the day. But the more she thought about the sinister rumor, the more believable she was starting to find it. The editor-in-chief of the most popular Sofia daily was arrested, and the next day he was found hanged in his cell. The Writers' Union expelled twenty-nine members because they had "served the Fascist establishment"; the Artists' Union "purged" thirteen people, and seven artists were expelled because they'd "propagated Fascist ideas". On the following day the milk woman appeared with another story, this time

told to her by another relative from the village of Chiren, near Vratsa. There was an inn in the village, serving both as a pub and a store. The innkeeper, Bai Dobri, was a good-natured man, just as his name suggested, and everybody loved him. A garrison of Soviet soldiers arrived and were quartered in the houses, while the commanding officers occupied the inn. Bai Dobri had a wife and a daughter. The Russians went on a drinking spree, ate a lot, drank a lot, and in the middle of the night they tied Bai Dobri to a pole and went on to violate the two women the whole night, all of them taking turns on them, right in front of his very eyes.



## DULEVA, Demetra

**Demetra Duleva** graduated in Italian Philology and English Language from Sofia University. She also studied Comparative Language Studies in Rome. For many years, she has worked as a freelance translator. In 2003, she joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Currently, she is a diplomat at the Embassy of Bulgaria in Paris. *The Wandering Albatross* is her debut novel.

### THE WANDERING ALBATROSS

#### SYNOPSIS

Gabriella arrives at the Brussels-North bus station with only a little luggage, Niko's guitar and a black cat. But her brave journey, filled with unexpected encounters and strange mishaps, is only now beginning. Life in the outlying neighborhoods of Sofia, Brussels and Paris can be surprisingly similar. Because everywhere the hardest thing to find is the only thing Gabriella is looking for: to be happy again.

It is very difficult to nurture, protect and develop the best parts of yourself in an environment and a time that eats away at people like acid. Gabriella's beloved can't handle this aggression. The fragile Gabriella,

however, like countless other women in Bulgaria, survives. This novel touches on themes such as the striving for happiness and the battle for the survival of the self. Emigration. The division between East and West, those who remained and those who left. The years before '89 and those times – the '90s. And this has provoked a strong public response to the book. Because Gabriella is a composite character, a spokesperson for a whole generation, which over the decades has been on the edge of spiritual survival.

Novel, 240 pages

ISBN: 9789542619383

Hermes Publishing House, 2019

Nominated for the 2020 *Culture Portal* Annual Awards in the Prose category  
Nominated for the 2020 13 Centuries of Bulgaria Award for Bulgarian Novel of the Year

### EXCERPT

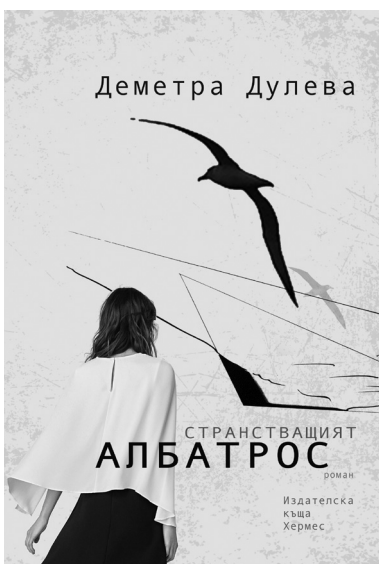
*translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel*

I open my eyes and for a long time I can't figure out where I am. Mousie jumps on top of me. I'm lying in pink sheets, fluffy blankets wrap me up like cotton candy. Nora's pink sheets, which she uses at night to heal her cynicism.

Man has been given the ability to dream. Dreams that you pray will never end or others from which you awaken in relief. For years now I've mostly been having nightmares. I experience all my major fears dozens of times a night and in the morning I wake up exhausted. Most often I drown in impenetrably deep water in thousands of different ways – the bridge beneath me collapses, someone pushes me off a cliff, I fall off a boat, the house floods while I'm asleep, a torrent carries me away...

This past night I've slept happily and dreamed my rarest dream, which I haven't had since I was a kid – I'm flying, soaring through the sky. How I love that feeling of lightness. It's so simple in a dream – I spread my arms and take flight. I don't ask myself any questions about the mechanics of flying, about the position of my body, about wings. I don't have any, by the way. I simply fly, just like that, as if it is my most natural state and I feel amazing. Sometimes I do trickier things in my sleep as well – I make a sharp dive headfirst and then soar up again, having caught a strong gust of wind. I can feel the air currents with my entire body and I master them perfectly.

I wake up light as a feather and feel brand-new.



On the kitchen table I find a note:

I fed the cat. The coffee machine is loaded and ready to go. Milk, butter and hard-boiled eggs are in the fridge. Bread and Nutella – in the cupboard over the sink. I'll be back around two and we can go on a walk.

Nora is incredible, but I can't use her as a crutch. Our deal was to split all expenses for rent and utilities. I already owe her a ton in any case.

Tomorrow I start looking for a job. I have an orderly plan of how I'll go around to all the theaters, restaurants and hotels. I've thought up exactly how I'll introduce myself. Who knows, maybe they'll hire me to play somewhere.

I'll ask Nora to print out 100 copies of my cobbled-together CV. Besides my name, birth date and phone number, not a single thing on it is true. I've filled it up with fibs, but ones that sounds good. I also have "references." Nora will sign one of them herself. I've got no choice – I'll have to lie. At the moment not a single truth about me will be of any use to me.

Living up high suits me.

The apartment is on the eleventh floor of a modern building and has an enormous panoramic balcony.

I've always loved looking at the world from up above. I can see hundreds of tiled rooftops, trees, domes, clocktowers. Way in the back, exactly where the sun sets in the evening, the gilded steeple of the Palace of Justice juts up.

To the left, amidst the low-hanging fog, the neighborhood's swampy lakes sparkle. I read in the guidebook before coming that the city was built on drained swamps. Remnants of them can be seen in almost all the parks, shaped into reflecting pools and surrounded by pedantically arranged lawns, sculptured hedges and rare species of trees.

Nora is late, I'll go on that walk by myself, besides I can hardly sit still anymore.

I go out and start walking along the lakes.

A pale sun shreds the low clouds. A golden ray slides obliquely across the surface of the water, lighting up the church and the square like a spotlight. It passes over my face and stops on the windows of Café Belga. In this city the light is different.

For a split second the veils of mist lift and I see a surrealistic world, like a jewelry box fashioned from stone, whose secrets are hidden within. Its luxury lies in its exquisite details – marble columns, granite flowers, brass fixtures, bronze lamps and carved wooden benches. And as an added bit of splendor, green parrots fly over the parks, orchids bloom along the windowsills...

I cross a square (Place Flagey I read on the sign) and try to draw myself a map of the new place – the supermarket, the bank, the bakery, the bus stop, the movie theater. My first jumping-off points.

My walk is short, the winter wind is merciless, but the air is so humid that it penetrates my clothes and pierces my bones. After an hour outside my teeth start chattering uncontrollably.

I stop by the bank, then the bakery. I buy several croissants, go back home, make myself coffee and sit in the kitchen. The warm beverage pleasantly heats up my entire body.

From the window the entrance to the building and the boulevard with its big plane trees are visible. Dusk is falling. It's started to drizzle. The headlights on the wet asphalt bend into long reflections, while the trunks of the bare trees gleam a metallic blue.

I like it.

I look out the window as raindrops cover the glass completely.

With cup in hand I stroll around the apartment. I'm mastering the space.

A small living room, decorated with impeccable taste that I've only seen at Nora's. The bathroom is bigger than the kitchen – with large mirrors, a quartz lamp, fluffy towels, slippers with pom-poms.

The chic apartment and the luxurious neighborhood are puzzling to me. Nora could hardly cover the rent from her salary alone. I won't ask her, but I don't think she'd tell me anyway. We might be best friends, but she is very discreet about certain things. And she has always been shrouded in mystery when it comes to men. But that's just how she is – she doesn't like having to explain herself or to be rebuked, even in jest. Take now – she's late again. I'm sure it's best not to ask questions.

Nora has been in Brussels for a long time, she's already figured out how things work. Last night she quickly filled me in that at the moment she's working at the airport, at the "Tin Can" – that's what they call the glass structure that houses the VIP lounges, off to the side of the main terminal for arrivals and departures. A while ago they promoted her to manager. It hasn't been easy, for years on end she had to get up at three in the morning and start her shift at five, to kiss up to her bosses, to beg, to insist, to threaten.

When she arrived in Brussels eight years ago, she worked as a house-cleaner, a waitress, a home healthcare aide. Her winning bet turned out to be her certificate in Flemish language. Here, to get a better job, you have to know both languages. She invested all her savings in language courses and in a BA in management. While she was mopping floors and clearing tables, she studied. It took her a few years to get

the necessary diplomas and certificates. But afterwards things really did take off. She started at the airport at the make-up counter in the duty-free shops. She had to keep her eyes peeled all day, because there were lots of shoplifters and they withheld any losses from her paycheck. For years she demonstrated that she was a zealous and disciplined employee, with leadership qualities.

Nora is Nora – a worldly-wise woman who knows how to give orders. Now she was something like the boss of the VIP lounges, she welcomed and sent off important personages. She liked the job, the pay was decent. And most of all she liked the opportunity to hang around wealthy men.

It has long since gotten dark outside. I arranged all my things in the wardrobe. I made a list of the most urgent things I need to buy. I turn on the TV and try to orient myself amidst the numerous Francophone and Flemish channels. All the shows are strange to me and I flip back and forth aimlessly.

I have nothing to do.

There's nothing left but for me to sit by the window and observe the life of the city. And to pet Mousie. After the long journey, she is settling in, too. She stretches out in my lap and purrs.

Around ten a huge white Audi stops in front of the entrance. The headlights go out so as not to attract attention. It stays there in the dark for some time. Then the door opens, Nora jumps out and briskly slips into the entrance. I recognize her by her gold leather jacket, which goes perfectly with her hair.

She soon comes in, fresh and beaming, an apology is out of the question. With her, everything is dizzyingly fast, she moves quickly, talks impatiently. She opens the fridge and takes out a bottle of white wine. She fills the glasses and hands me one: "Here, I want to celebrate your arrival in Brussels."

We clink glasses and sit down on the couch. The wine is fantastic – Chablis, this is the first time I've heard of it, but I really like it. Nora deftly unwraps and arranges various ready-made snacks on painted porcelain plates, clearly hand-made: avocado with smoked salmon, foie gras and cranberry, white mushrooms with black truffles...

"Leftovers from the VIPs," she smiles. She leans back on the soft couch, takes a sip and adds: "So tell me all about it!"

I haven't seen her in a long time, it's not easy for me to fall immediately into heart-to-heart mode. But Nora does not tolerate anyone going silent or clamming up. She might keep her distance, but the people around her have no right to personal space.

For this reason I quickly let down my guard and lay out my plans.

When she learns that I plan to go around handing out CVs, Nora tosses her head back and breaks into almost scornful laughter. She speaks through clenched teeth – not to me, but to some past that she has escaped from at the cost of many sacrifices: "Your naivety is going to kill me! You think that's how it works? Don't think they're out there just waiting for you. Everyone here misses the colonial past. They'll look at you coldblooded with their pragmatic eyes to judge where they could best use you – there are job openings for cleaning women, waitresses, babysitters, janitors or berry-pickers. You'll be a foreign woman who has come here to steal away their men, their money, their jobs. They want our bodies and our brains, our strength and our talent, only to tell us in the end that we're stealing from them. It's best for you to cure yourself of all your illusions now. Nobody wants us and nobody is going to feel sorry for us. And I'd also advise you not to say you're Bulgarian, they don't like us much. I pretend to be Russian, it goes over better."

She falls silent, takes a sip of wine, and adds coolly: "There's no reason to go around with your CV. I've found you a job. In a chocolate shop. You can even start tomorrow."

And that's that.

With a snap of her fingers, Nora has found me a job. And ruined all the peace of mind I'd enjoyed today, all of my hopes for a new beginning.

From the way she announced it to me I understand that our conversation on this topic is over. It sounds like an order, not a favor from a friend.

How could I be angry with her when I know that the price she has paid to reach this place – to be able to snap her fingers – is far too high to be easily swallowed?

She will never forgive them that she cleaned their houses and served their food. She will never forgive them that she had to make nice with them and beg.

Nora does not forgive!

She gets up and pads cat-like towards the kitchen. She is so beautiful and elegant. You can't stop gazing at her even if you try. The lightness with which she takes over a space and points it towards herself has always bowled me over.

I can't say why, but from the very beginning there has been something in our friendship that has caused me to be constantly on my guard.

She has long acted as my patron, but in the shadow of her condescendence I feel even more insignificant.

I'm not particularly interested in my appearance, I hardly care how I look. I think about it only when I am around Nora.

In my room there is a smallish square mirror. I stare at it and as always up to now,

I try to figure out what I really look like. Am I pretty? Do others find me so? I don't think they notice me much. And why should they, when even I consider myself something rather undefined.

I think that for women like Nora I pass for "pretty enough, but clueless." It is precisely the use of this dismissive "enough" that is most insulting. I'm so beneath notice that I don't even rank as pretty or ugly.

With one blink of my eyelids I erase my entire identity.

"What, you aren't complaining, are you, darling? Didn't you want a different life – well here it is, on a silver platter" – the image in the mirror looks at me sadly.

Mousie tries to cheer me up by rubbing against my legs.

"You've got it easy, Mousie," I sigh inwardly. "You're a cat, you've got nine lives. While we people have only one. And mine, wherever I go, is always on the bottom of the food chain."

I no longer know who I am and what I want. I have the strange feeling that I am evaporating slowly and that soon I will disappear completely. The woman in the mirror and who as of tomorrow will sell chocolate is some other Gabriella.

As soon as I got off the bus, alone at Brussels-North, I realized that when you find yourself in a strange place, you don't have time to ask yourself existential questions. You are so concentrated on figuring out the rules and finding your footing on this new soil that you forget about yourself, what you want to be and what you dream about.

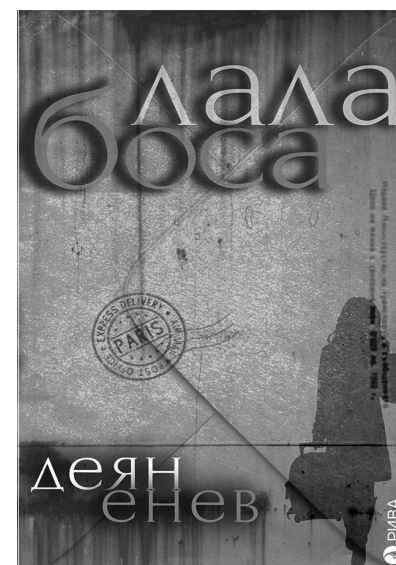
You try to survive.

That's it. Everything else disappears.



## ENEV, Deyan

Deyan Enev was born on August 11, 1960, in Sofia. He graduated from an English language high school in Sofia and holds a degree in Bulgarian Philology from Sofia University. He has worked as a painter at the Bulgarian National Film Center, a night orderly at a hospital, press operator in a military plant, and a teacher. He has worked as a journalist at a number of newspapers. He has published over 3000 nonfiction works – interviews, reportages, articles, features, feuilletons. He is the recipient of some of the most prestigious national awards for literature. Currently, he is a columnist at *Culture Portal*. He has published over twenty-three books.



## LALA BAREFOOT

REVIEW

"Actually, there is one stylistic technique that is particularly characteristic of all of Deyan Enev's previous books, and which can be found with particular emphasis in his latest collection of stories as well. It should be noted that many of his stories are stylized as journalistic (or even tabloid) "reports" of sorts – deliberately lacking the typical "literary" descriptions, without "remarks" by the author, almost literally "transcribed" from the reporter's recording device and

placed on the editor's desk – so that he who has assigned them to the “reporter” can comment upon them and use them as he sees fit. Except that precisely this is Deyan Enev's unique writerly “trick.” Because in fact, no “editorial office” exists at all to assign and make “reports” about exactly this world, which the writer “records” and offers up for contemplation. Or... such an editorial office does exist, except that it is not here somewhere, but strictly speaking is an “editorial office” made up of the guardian angels of a certain type of people who never turn up in actual news reports.

Yes, those who have assigned “the reporter” Deyan Enev have in mind and are interested in a world within the world, which mundane “editorial offices” are not interested in and which they would never bother to cover. Indeed: the “editorial office” with whom the “reporter” Deyan Enev works is an **angelic** editorial office and its “editorial policy” is solicitous, secret yet persistent and unyielding **compassion** toward that tribe of people whom this world usually does not notice, does not cover or at the very least it does not cover their **faces**, which seem by definition to not exist for it in “close up shots.” It does not pay attention to their words, does not share their petty dramas, joys, spiritual movements.”

Prof. Kalin Yanakiev, PhD, “Reporter of the Angels”,  
in: *Culture Portal*, January 19, 2020.

Short stories, 108 pages  
ISBN: 9789543206841  
Riva Publishing House, 2019

## EXCERPT

*translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel*

### LALA BAREFOOT

Richie was a brave dog. When they came down in the elevator from the sixth floor of that tall apartment block in that outlying neighborhood of Sofia, where she lived in a studio apartment, Richie was not afraid of the strange noises that the cables of the elevator made, as if raising and lowering the anchor of a transatlantic ship, Richie was not afraid, but instead bravely bolted out of the elevator on the ground floor, he would barely wait for them to go to the grassy space between the apartment blocks where she would take off his leash and he would dash off running, without being afraid that somewhere along the way he might meet other dogs much bigger

than him, and that he might get hurt, he bravely hurled himself into battles and those battle often ended with injuries, but despite being injured Richie's spirit never flagged, his gaze was as bold as ever and that gaze beneath the blonde fur on his head, which resembled the hair of a blonde boy with a straight part, went very well with his Cocker Spaniel-esque snout; when they parted, because she left for that far-off French city close to the Atlantic coast and was forced to leave Richie with her parents in the village, he kept up his brave look at the moment of their parting, he probably thought they would not be apart for long, that they would not be apart forever, but that's exactly what happened, their separation went on forever and in the end Richie's bold gaze faded and he died, first he got sick, he could no longer chase the chickens in the yard, he couldn't walk at all anymore, he was coughing, her father wrapped him up in a blanket, but Richie started shaking, stopped eating and drinking and in the end he died and her father buried him at the far end of the yard and afterwards whenever he passed by there on the walkway, his eyes would mist up and it's good nobody saw that; this month her father would turn ninety, of course, they would talk on the phone, she would send him a postcard as well from her far-off French city near the Atlantic Coast, but no one sent postcards anymore, postcards were a thing of the past, just like that cement walkway under the grape arbor next to their old brick house, she had been five, she couldn't say “r” yet, they had just washed down the walkway with the hose and she was jumping around barefoot and running down it, yelling loudly “Lala barefoot,” “Lala barefoot,” that actually wasn't her name, her real name had an “r” in it, but she couldn't say “r” yet and so she called herself Lala, later she learned to say “r,” of course, when she learned French, her French “r” even sounded very rich and inimitable, exactly like a real Frenchwoman; and while she was traveling by streetcar to the other side of the city on a Sunday morning to where the little Greek church was so she could go to mass, who knows why that “Lala barefoot” popped into her head, it stayed in her head even when the congregation in the church, which had come from various corners of the world to that far-off French city on the Atlantic Coast, began to recite one after another the words from the prayer “Our Father” each in their own language, in Romanian, in Russian, in Ukrainian, in Greek, in Bulgarian, finally the Syrians said the “Our Father” in Aramaic as well, Aramaic sounded so soft, it resembled a birdsong, in it, miraculously, there also seemed to be room for that “Lala barefoot” that had brought back the memory, while she was still on the streetcar, of that cement walkway hosed down under the arbor next to the old brick house, where at that very moment her mother was walking, raising her head from time to time like a bird...

## THE SONG OF THE WHEELS <sup>1</sup>

Five streets met at this little square and it resembled a star. There was a watchmaker's workshop, a small flower shop and a restaurant there. From the early morning on, the sun's rays would illuminate that part of the square, forming something like a cave of light.

The watchmaker's workshop was tucked into half of an entryway that had been divided in two and was as small as a matchbox. But inside there was room for a workbench, for a bright lamp and for a box filled with microscopic tools with which the watchmaker, had he so desired, could have fitted a flea with horseshoes.

The restaurant next store underwent various incarnations. First it was a smokey pizzeria. Then it became a ritzy sushi bar. And finally, once again after prolonged renovations, the walls were hung with bridles, saddles and ponchos, the front windows were painted with three horsemen with bandannas around their necks, broad-brimmed hats and spurs, and it was called "Tres Gauchos."

When he opened around ten, the owner of the restaurant leaned on the doorframe and smoked a strong brown cigarette, squinting his blue eyes at the smoke with an intense bandit-like gaze.

The watchmaker usually opened up at the same time. He also leaned against the doorframe. He had salt-and-pepper hair, a boyish face, and an absorbed expression, the result of his dealings with the fine gears of eternity.

The girl from the little flower shop would also come out. And sometimes, in a rush of nostalgia for some wilder times from his own biography, the restaurant owner would jump up, pull out his cash and buy a bouquet of roses from the girl. And then he would give them to her, kneeling with such vigor on the sidewalk that his spurs would ring.

The watchmaker would start clapping.

Then both of them would go back to work.

But there was no work. This neighborhood was home primarily to old people, who slowly crept along the sidewalks like bugs, dragging their wheeled bags towards the nearest big chain store where there were special sales at the top of every hour. Most of them had long since pawned their watches at the pawnshop. And the watchmaker found his salvation when he shuttered his workshop and began traveling around the country fixing the age-old congealed mechanisms inside city clocks in their clocktowers.

For his part, the owner of the Tres Gauchos restaurant also locked his place up and disappeared, most likely finding a safe refuge in his old bandit trade.

But wouldn't you know, one day on the sidewalk in front of the watchmaker's shop, an old guitarist showed up and slipped into the cave of light. His jacket was ripped, the scarf around his neck was rusty, but day after day he sat on the curb, plugged his guitar into an amp and his songs reached to the very end of the five streets that began at that little square. His voice was husky and moving. He most often sang a song in Spanish, "Los Ejes De Mi Carreta." The song's lyrics said: *Because I don't grease the wheels of my wagon and they squeak, people call me a good-for-nothing. But I like the way they sound. If I don't hear them, I would be bored. I don't need silence. The song of the wheels of my wagon is so dear to me, so sweet.*

When she heard that song, the little florist would appear at the door and listen dreamily for a long time, her eyes fixed on the old guitarist. And he, noticing the rapt attention his listener was paying to the song, would start playing it again as soon as he had finished, always the same song. Los Ejes De Mi Carreta.

## THE GIFT

Her work place was beneath the columns of a long apartment block on a major boulevard. In the middle of the block there was a space to pass beneath it, something like a tunnel, a shortcut for people going to the other apartment blocks in the complex, so they wouldn't have to walk all the way around the whole long building. At some point, someone had closed in a little corner under the columns and had created a little booth for selling coffee, juice, alcohol, cigarettes and candy bars. And that girl worked at that booth.

A meter away from the booth, again under the columns, a counter with metal legs had also been set up so that those who bought coffee or a little flask of booze would have a dignified place to set them while digging in their pockets for cigarettes.

The girl was polite and obliging. And for that reason the men who gathered around the counter – why lie, they were mostly the neighborhood drunks, dissolute unemployed people who for one reason or another had been rejected by society – with great affection referred to her among themselves as "The Little Squirrel."

Whenever I passed by there, I would see how the men's faces changed over time, how the alcohol was unforgiving, how their cheeks puffed and swelled, how their eyes grew hidden, while their legs trembled more and more and found it ever harder to stagger across the street. But clearly for them it was a matter of honor to drag themselves to the little booth, to proclaim their presence once again that day in their little society, to holler out the words that get stuck in a person's throat during the night.

Most often Ivan, the Rebel and Vesel would show up. Ivan was an elderly poet and writer whom fame and recognition had passed by like an express train, his wife had

<sup>1/</sup> This is also the title of a story by one of Bulgaria's most famous writers, Yordan Yovkov (1880-1937), especially known for his depictions of Bulgarian village life.



died and the gathering by the booth was his only entertainment during the day. The Rebel was a man to be reckoned with, tall, big-boned and husky, he'd been the captain of a ship and still kept the rolling gait that sailors use to walk the decks of a ship amidst a raging sea. But he, too, over the course of several years grew thin, burned out, his clothes were covered with stains. Vesel was a TV mechanic and up until a few years ago he had run a small TV repair shop tucked into a garage on a nearby street.

But the new flatscreen TVs had eaten up his business, the door to his repair shop rusted and he started spending his whole day there, by the booth.

That day the three of them had decided that when they met up they would discuss what kind of present to buy for the Little Squirrel, since Christmas was just around the corner. They each bought a shooter, drank them and felt that rush of strength, as in their earlier years. But besides their burning desire to buy a present for the Squirrel, they also needed money, and money was something they didn't have.

A few coins were jingling around in their pockets, enough to buy them two or three more miniature bottles of alcohol. But nothing more.

And then Ivan, the old writer whom fame has passed by, announced that he had a big red sled at home, about a meter long, pulled by two reindeer with branching antlers, and Santa Clause was sitting on the sled, with a red hat, a beard and a red suit, exactly like the real thing. They had gotten it as a present for his grandson when he had been little, but shortly after that his daughter and grandson and son-in-law had moved abroad, so the sled had stayed at his place.

No sooner said than done. The other two also liked the idea and they all headed towards Ivan's apartment to drag the sled to the booth. And when everything was ready, the three of them opened up another shooter each with a sense of duty fulfilled and knocked on the Squirrel's window.

She opened the little door, looked at them, saw the sled. Ivan, the most eloquent among them, announced why it was there. The Squirrel looked at them. Then she burst into tears and started wiped her eyes with her fists. And suddenly, amidst the sheen of her tears, she started laughing. She stepped forward and quickly went over to each of the three of them. Since she was short, she had to stand on her tip-toes. And she kissed them on their unshaven stinking cheeks.

And Santa Clause was sitting in the sleigh next to them. He almost seemed to move. He probably wanted a kiss, too.

## BEAR COUNTRY

The news that a bear had come down into the territory of the village scalded people like boiling water. Once upon a time it had been a well-known fact that this part of the mountain was bear country. And for that reason it was no coincidence that in the olden days the men here were famed as some of the best bear hunters. But those glorious times had long since passed. And even if you ask none other than Grandpa Dyalo himself, the oldest person in the village, you still wouldn't learn anything else. Because over the past few years Grandpa Dyalo had been sitting on the bench in front of the townhall, his head lolling to one side, leaning against the wall in his homespun jacket, such that he had worn away the plaster and not saying anything, but just mumbling unintelligibly with his toothless gums. He had only livened up once in all these years – when at the height of the village fair a Gypsy crossed the square with a bear. But the bear was small and skittish, it looked more like a dog than a bear. The Gypsy had trained it to eat pretzel sticks and to bow to the prosecutor, and that it did very well. But petrifying livestock with its roar or leaving claw marks ten feet up the trunk of the old elm tree in the middle of the square, just like the marks still visible on the tree from the olden days, that the Gypsy's bear could not do, because, as we already said, it was small and skittish.

The Gypsy with the bear came and went and complete stagnation once again descended over the village, Grandpa Dyalo was again sitting on the bench, leaning his back against the townhall, lolling his head to one side and smacking his toothless gums together and it was as if that nightmarish time of drowned goats and donkeys, of toppled beehives in the fields, of flattened fences had irrevocably slipped into the past when, wouldn't you know it, the village awoke to the frightening news that a bear had come down into its territory.

The very next day a car from some television station stopped in front of the townhall. The mayor had clearly already been informed, he came out to greet the cameraman and the journalist on the steps, beet-red from all the attention. He ushered them into his office, treated them to whiskey and cashews, making sure to wipe the dusty glasses with his tie beforehand, and then launched into a long-winded story about all the bear-related outrages the village had suffered and how in the past they had been forced to call in an army unit with machine guns to guarantee the safety of the locals and their animals. He really had heard that bit about the machine guns, but it was in reference to something else, that story was about the bloody deer hunting party starring some local bigwigs.

The TV folks filmed the interview with the mayor and inspired by the drinks and the fact that they had almost finished their work, they went back out to the square,

looking all around. Likely they were expecting the bear to jump out from somewhere now, too, so they could film it as well – the ultimate action shot for their report.

But the bear did not show and they headed towards the nearby pub to have lunch and to ask questions and to find out more, if they could, about the beast.

So they didn't even notice when they left that the old man on the bench had disappeared. When he reappeared, the square was empty as always – not hair nor hair of the TV people. Grandpa Dyalo sat down in his usual spot and set down the bag he was carrying next to him and threw his arm over it.

He had gone to his attic to get the big knife, as long as a forearm and as wide as a palm, as well as his buffalo-hide vest, which was fastened with straps so it would cling tightly to the body. Buffalo hide was the only skin bear claws could not tear. That vest had saved his life many times back in the day. And the knife, of course. A heavy knife, long as a whole forearm and wide as a spread palm. Not everyone could lift such a knife today. Let alone take a strong swing with it.

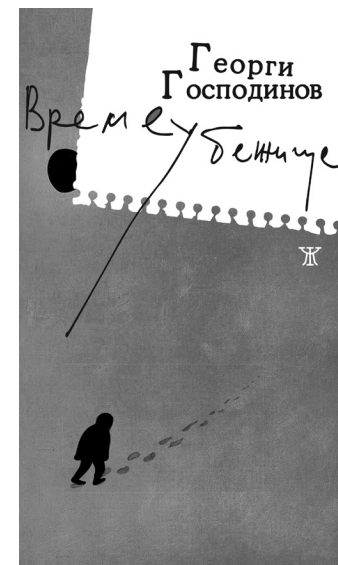


# G

## GOSPODINOV, Georgi

Georgi Gospodinov (1968, Bulgaria) is one of the most translated Bulgarian writers. He is the author of *Natural Novel* and *The Physics of Sorrow*, winner of Central European Angelus Award (2019) and Jan Michalski Prize (2016), finalist for HKW and Berliner Brucke Prize. His novels are translated in more than 25 languages.

His latest novel, *Time Shelter*, has been published in Bulgaria in April 2020 amidst the quarantine and is still among the bestselling books in the country. His international rights are represented by the Wylie Agency.



### TIME SHELTER

SYNOPSIS

Gaustine is a peculiar and peripatetic personage, who roams across time. The narrator meets him for the first time in the early 1990s. At that time, Gaustine is an antiquarian who has chosen to live in the 1930s – day by day he reads the corresponding issue of a newspaper from the year he is in, cut off from contemporary life around him. Finally, on the eve of World War II, September 1st of 1939 (according to his own chronology), he sends a letter to the narrator, saying that the situation has become unbearable, war is inevitable, the Nazis

are running amuck, and he has no choice but to take a ship to America.

The narrator finds him later: Gaustine has opened his first independent “clinic for the past” in Zurich. This is part of a new and ever more popular therapy for people suffering from Alzheimer’s. Each floor of the clinic reproduces a decade in detail: the ‘50s, the ‘60s, the ‘70s, the ‘80s... in synch with the patients’ fading internal time. The victims lose their sense of the future and the present, but nature has been merciful – in the end allows them to play just a bit longer in their childhood bedrooms. Gaustine’s rooms do just that – they unlock memories by recreating the world of yesterday. They create a time that is synchronous with the internal time inhabited by those suffering from memory loss.

This is a novel/investigation into how to live with a critical deficit of future, which weaves together irony, nostalgia, and satire, switching between various narrative levels. A novel about the discreet monster of the past that waits for us tomorrow.

Novel, 372 pages

ISBN: 9786191865635

Janet-45 Publishing House, 2020

## EXCERPT

*translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel*

### ROOMS OF THE PAST

The whole meadow out front was dotted with forget-me-nots, here and there peonies and some big red poppies erupted. But the petite forget-me-nots shone blue amidst the Swiss green of the grass, I am sure that Swiss green exists, I can’t believe someone hasn’t patented it yet. Is it some sort of joke, planting forget-me-nots in front of a geriatric psychiatric center? The door opened, I went up to the top floor where Gaustine’s clinic was, with several years’ rent paid for in advance by Mr. S, I rang the doorbell and Gaustine himself in a turtleneck and big round glasses opened the door onto 196...

Weren’t you heading to New York in 1939 last time I saw you, I quipped as casually as I could. When did you get back?

After the war, he replied, unruffled.

So what are we going to do now?

Rooms from different times. As a start.

Rooms of the past? It sounds like a title.

Yes, rooms of the past. Or a clinic of the past. Or a city... Are you in?

I had just gotten divorced, with the vague idea of trying to make a living thinking up stories. I had a soft spot for the ‘60s, I tumbled easily into any past, but, of course, I did have my favorite decades. I had no good reason not to stay for a short while, a month or two at most.

–

In the beginning Gaustine occupied only one of the three apartments on the top floor. The smallest space near the front door, the servant’s quarters, as he called it – and it’s highly probable that this is exactly what it had been used for – was now his office. The other three rooms of the apartment, including the hallway, were in another time. You open the door and fall directly into the middle of the ‘60s. The entryway with the classic coat rack and bench ensemble, dark green, made of fake leather with brass studs. We had one like it at home. I should say that although I was born at the tail end of the ‘60s, I remember them clearly, from beginning to end, and they are part of my Bulgarian childhood not due to mystical reasons (although I continue to believe that memories are passed down directly from parent to child). The reason I have them in my head is actually quite trivial: the 1960s, just like everything in Bulgaria, were simply delayed and arrived ten or so years later. Most likely during the 1970s.

A light-green coat with two rows of wooden buttons was hanging from the coat rack. I remember that when I stepped in for the first time that morning, I froze when I saw it. That was my mother’s coat. It was as if any second she would open the living room door, the typical beveled glass would glint, and she would be standing there – young, twenty-something, much younger than I am now. Even though when your mother appears at 20, you automatically turn into a child as well and at that moment of awkwardness and joy you wonder whether to hug her or simply to casually call out: hey mom, I’m home, I’m going to my room. All this lasted only a second... or a minute.

Welcome to the ‘60s, Gaustine smiled, observing my shock in the entryway to the decade with a furtive smirk. I didn’t want to leave my imagination just yet and immediately turned towards the kids’ room. Two twin beds in the corners, each covered in yellow shag comforter made of some fake fiber (we called it ledeka back then, it must’ve been an abbreviation) with a brown chest between them, the two beds meeting perpendicularly at the chest. I glanced at Gaustine, he understood and nodded, and I threw myself down on the bed, just as I was in my jacket, shoes and 50-year-old body, and landed in my eight-year-old body amidst the tickling fringe of the comforter...

...

The living room was bright and spacious, the philodendron in the corner by the window and the rushes in the tall ceramic vase in front of the photo mural on the wall once again sent me back to that decade. I remembered how we used to wipe the philodendron (what a name!) with a wet rag soaked in beer. Somebody had recommended that, so all living rooms back then reeked like beer.

But the photo wall mural was a true epiphany, as well as the epitome of kitsch. Thanks to yet another international truck driver, a friend of my father's, even we had gotten our hands on a photo wall mural. An autumn woods with the sun shining through the trees. A schoolmate of mine had a wall with a Hawaiian beach, complete with a few bathing beauties in the foreground. The one here was more reminiscent of his, an endless beach and a sunset over the ocean. What else to put on a wall mural in Switzerland? Not the Matterhorn and the Alps, in any case.

And there's the small square trunk of the television, standing uneasily on four long wooden legs, the exact same one we had.

Is it an Opera? I glance at Gaustine in surprise.

No, it's a Phillips, he replies. But guess who was stealing designs from whom.

Indeed, the shape and everything else was 100% identical, the industrial espionage department of the People's Republic of Bulgaria had not been sleeping on the job. But there are those tulip chairs as well, who knows why our guys didn't steal that design as well, they were familiar to me only from movies and the Neckerman catalogue. Elongated, cosmically aerodynamic, deep red, with a single leg, or rather, stem. Of course, I immediately wanted to sit down. Just as I wanted to help myself to the box of chocolate candies wrapped in tinfoil on the coffee table. I reached towards it, then stopped.

Wait, when are these chocolates from?

They're fresh, from the '60s, Gaustine smiled.

Does the past have an expiration date?...

...

Why here exactly, why Switzerland?

Let's just say thanks to a fondness for the Magic Mountain. Besides, here I can find people to buy my idea and invest money. There are enough people here ready to pay to die happy.

It is astonishing how cynical G. can be at times.

Let's just stick with the fondness for the Magic Mountain, I said.

The truth is, Switzerland is the ideal country due to its time degree zero. A country

without time can most easily be inhabited by all possible eras. It has managed to preserve itself (to slip through) – including during the 20th century – without particular identifying marks that always keep you in a certain time.

There's a lot of work yet to be done, he said, wiping the lenses of his round glasses. Here you see a middle-class '60s, but as you know, not every past and every youth was like this. We need to have a 1960s for workers, student dorms. As well as the '60s for those who lived in Eastern Europe, our 1960s. One day, when this business really takes off, Gaustine continued, lighting up a long, thin blue Pall Mall, we'll create these clinics or sanatoriums in various countries. The past is also a local thing. There'll be houses of the past everywhere, little neighborhoods, one day we'll even have small cities, maybe even a whole country. For patients with failing memories, Alzheimer's, degenerative diseases, dementia, whatever you want to call it. For all of those who already are living solely in the present of their past. And for us, he said finally after a short pause, letting out a long stream of smoke. The time is coming when more and more people will want to hide in the cave of the past, to turn back. And not for happy reasons, by the way. We need to be ready with the bomb shelter of the past. Call it the time shelter, if you will.

Back then I didn't understand what he meant. Just as I was never sure whether he was joking or whether he joked around at all.

–

For us, the past is the past, Gaustine was getting worked up now. And even when we step into it, we know that the exit [to the present] is open, we can come back with ease. For them, this door has slammed shut once and for all. For them, the past is the present, that is the difference, and this is nothing to be trifled with. For this reason, we must be very careful. Their entire short-term memory has gone to the dogs. We can't bring them back to today, yesterday or the day before that. The only thing we can try to do is change the present time, call it "outer time," if you will. To create a space that will be in synch with their inner time. If it is 1965 inside me, when I was 20 and I lived in a rented attic in Paris, Krakow or behind Sofia University, then let the outside world, at least in the confines of a single room, be 1965, too. I don't know how therapeutic that is, who knows whether it will help regenerate neural synapses. But these people deserve the right to happiness, to a memory of happiness, to be more precise. We assume that the memory of happiness is a happy memory, but who knows? We'll see what they say, what they remember, some of them haven't spoken a word in months. Oh, I remember that lamp perfectly, it was in the parlor at home, later the bulb burned out, then... How did you get our sofa... shouldn't it be right here, a bit closer to the wall?

I asked for a cigarette, I had quit five years ago, but now we were in a different time, God damn it, before I had quit. We sat in silence for some time, watching the smoke from the Pall Mall Gold from the '60s wafting beneath the round lamp. The January editions of Time and Newsweek from 1968 had been casually tossed on the coffee table. The whole back cover was an ad for those very same cigarettes, gold with an extended filter and the slogan "Because it's extra long at both ends."

I remember that when I met Gaustine for the first time many years ago, we smoked Tomasian cigarettes from 1937, which he had offered me. We had moved about 30 years ahead in time, after all. I was about to remind him of that, but something stopped me. For a moment I thought that he would give me a strange look as if nothing like that had ever happened.

Look, he lit up a new cigarette, pausing ever so slightly before his next sentence (I remember that trick from the films of the '60s and '70s: you take a deep drag, holding the smoke in your lungs, then exhale slowly with squinted eyes), I need you.

I'll make you an offer you can't refuse, as the classic scene from the movie puts it. But for the moment I played hard to get and pretended to be angry.

Well, in that case, you could've given me a sign. It was a complete accident that I found you.

There was no way you wouldn't have found me. After all, you thought me up, right? He muttered, barely bothering to hide his spite. I read one of your books, come across an interview now and then. Besides, you're my godfather, you christened me, otherwise I would still be called Augustine-Garibaldi, or have you forgotten?

You really never can tell when Gaustine is joking.

What the hell did they drink during the 60s, anyway? I cut in.

Everything. Gaustine took the hint, took a bottle of Four Roses bourbon out of the mini-bar and filled two heavy crystal glasses. Look here, with these couches, tables, and the bourbon (cheers!), with these lamps and light fixtures, with the music and all the pop art of the '60s – all that we can handle fine on our own. But as you yourself well know, the past is more than a set. We're going to need stories, lots of stories. He stubbed out his cigarette and immediately reached for another one.

I had forgotten how much people smoked in the '60s.

We'll need everyday life, tons of everyday life, smells, sounds, silences, people's faces, in short, all the things that crack the memory open, mixing memory and desire, as our man would say. You have experience with time capsules, right? That's the sort of thing I mean.

Travel around, gather up all the scents in the world, we need stories from various years, with that 'premonition of a miracle,' as I said in one of your stories, he added

with a laugh. All kinds of stories, big, small, lighter, let them be lighter this time. After all, for some of the folks here they will be the last stories they ever enter into.

It had grown dark outside. The clouds had gathered quickly above the lake and the rain poured down in long streams. Gaustine got up and closed the window.

Well, what do you know, in '68 today's date was also a Thursday, he said, glancing at the Pan Am Airlines calendar on the wall featuring models from different continents. And it also rained that afternoon, if you recall.

I got up to go. Before I started down the stairs, he said almost off the cuff: That saying that you can never step into the same story twice is not true. You can. That's what we're going to do.

It was the perfect job for me. When it comes down to it, that's what I've always done – I've always roamed like a flaneur through the arcades of the past. (Out of Gaustine's earshot, I could say that I made him up so that he could think up this job for me.) It allowed me to travel, to wander around ostensibly aimlessly, to write down even the most trivial of things – what more could I want? To gather up the bullet casings from 1942 or to see what is left of that dilapidated 1968, which nevertheless remains so important for all of us. Past eras are volatile, they evaporate with ease like an open bottle of perfume, but if you have the nose for it, you can always catch a whiff of their fragrance. You have a nose for the past, that's what Gaustine said once, a nose for other times, that'll come in handy for me. And so I officially became something of a trapper of the past.

Over the years, I've realized that it tends to hide above all in two places – in afternoons (in the way the light falls in the afternoon) and in scents. That's where I laid my traps.

There is light from another time.

Once (not so long ago), as I was wandering around Brooklyn, I sensed for the first time with such clarity that the light was from another time. I could define it quite precisely, the light of the '80s, sometime from the beginning of the decade, I think it was from 1982, late summer. Light as if from a Polaroid picture, lacking brightness, soft, making everything look slightly faded. I realized that I wouldn't have recognized it if not for its synchronous appearance with a particular smell, which came from the same decade and from my childhood. I think our whole memory for scents comes from childhood, it is stored there, in that portion of the brain responsible for our earliest memories. It was the scent of asphalt, of tar melted by the sun, the greasy, yes, greasy smell of petroleum. Brooklyn offered me this scent, perhaps because of the heat, perhaps they were fixing the road somewhere nearby, perhaps because of the nearby construction site or the big trucks that crisscrossed the neighborhood.

Or perhaps because of all of that taken together. With light, you can make some pathetic attempt to preserve it, to take a picture of it. Or like Manet you can paint a cathedral in various hours of the day. He knew what he was doing – the cathedral was only a ruse, a trap for capturing the rays of light. But with smells, no such tricks are available to us, there is no film or recording device, no such instrument has been invented over the long millennia, why has humanity dropped the ball on this?

Isn't it truly astonishing that there is no recording device for scents? Actually, there is one, a single solitary one that predates technology, it's analogue, the oldest of them all. Language, of course. For now, there is nothing else, thus I am forced to capture scents with words and to add them to yet another notebook. We remember only those scents that we have described or compared. The remarkable thing is that, in fact, we don't even have names for smells. God or Adam didn't quite finish the job. It's not like colors, for example, where you've got names like red, blue, yellow, violet.... We are not meant to name scents directly. Rather, it's always through comparison, always descriptive. It smells like violets, like toast, like seaweed, like rain, like a dead cat... But violets, toast, seaweed, rain and a dead cat are not the names of scents. How unfair. Or perhaps beneath this impossibility lurks some sign, which we do not understand...

And so I traveled around, gathering up scents and afternoons, cataloging them, we needed a precise and exhaustive description of which scent came back when, what age of person it affected most strongly, which decade we could call forth with it, I described them in detail and sent this to Gaustine, in the clinic scents could always be prepared when needed. They even made attempts to preserve the molecules of a given scent. Even though for Gaustine this was a waste of effort, it was much simpler and more authentic to toast a piece of bread or melt a bit of asphalt. We just needed to make a catalogue of scents organized by year.



## KRONEVA, Lyubov

Lyubov Kroneva was born in Burgas. She graduated in journalism in Moscow, but only worked as a journalist for a brief period of time. She mainly translates fiction from Russian. Her list of authors includes Sergei Dovlatov, Evgeniy Popov, Maria Arbatova, Tatyana Ustinova, Elena Afanasieva, Maks Narishkin, and Zakhar Prilepin. So far, she has published the novels *Black Tulips for Kant* (Janet-45, 2004), *The House with Angels* (Janet-45, 2007), *Pick and Dreams*, as well as the short story collections *Banally* (Janet-45, 2012), and *The Feast of the Wolf Theotokos* (Janet-45, 2016). *Wicked Witchy* is her sixth book.

### WICKEDY-WITCHY

#### SYNOPSIS

As long as I can remember fairytales have raised questions for me, such as: why do the characters always go into the forest, even though they have been warned about wolves and other dangers, they are told to stick to the path, but no, it's as if they purposely wander off into impenetrable thickets. What are they looking for there? A childish question, you might say, but how many of those who have learned their lessons the hard way can answer without immediately falling back on prohibitions that are not even worth discussing: don't touch fire, you'll get burned, don't go into the woods, because...



Now, after I have long followed the tracks of my questions, I have realized that no one ends up in the woods of his own free will, he is led there by fear and disgust with life, because he can't deal with his little reality, it's grown too narrow for him. And the tellers of fairytales, since time immemorial, have known about the impassable forest – that zone of the subconscious where everyone is forced to enter at some moment or another, and the more complex a human being becomes, the denser and more tangled that forest is.

Stories and novellas, 220 pages

ISBN: 9786191865451

Janet-45 Publishing House, 2020

## EXCERPT

*translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel*

Once upon a time in a blacker-than-black forest, there was a blacker-than-black house on chicken legs, and in it lived a blacker-than-black woman... and so on.

The forest, of course, will strike you as gloomy if you enter it at night, as is usually the case. And you stand there, not moving. You can no longer go back, you don't know which way to go, the darkness is seeping into you, spreading like a puddle, and you start to recall your entire pathetic life, the things you can't undo, and what you could have done but didn't do out of foolishness or vanity, and how regretful you are, but how the hell is regret going to help you, it's too late, it's too late, you'll never be able to put back together what's been broken. If you go into this forest during the day as well, which usually happens suddenly, as if you've been drop-kicked into it, again you'll get lost amidst the dark-green tangled thickets stretching indifferently towards the sky so as to hide it, amidst the unnatural quiet, interrupted by murmuring and popping and that pop! is the most depressing thing because you realize and who knows where this realization comes from that with this sound of a popping bubble someone's life is over, life is so ephemeral, so fragile, most likely your life, your own dear life, is the next to go, otherwise what would you be doing here... But there is a path. There is always a path. It appears all of a sudden, to lead you to that woman, the blacker-than-black one, it pulls you into the woods because you have problems and since you don't know how to deal with them in your world, then you'll deal in hers, which is precisely on the edge between the worlds. She might help you. She also might not help you. Sometimes it takes years for you to realize what she's done for you.

You start down the path. You'll come out in a meadow, you'll sigh in relief, it is easier to breathe in an open space, your thoughts become clearer, and there is the house of Mrs. Heda, the astrologer. At night bluish light springs from somewhere and envelops the house, as if a thousand fireflies were fluttering about. In the village they are convinced that they are solar lamps, because how could you entice and train a whole swarm of fireflies to light it up, with no mind paid to the season, even in the winter, they're solar lamps, there's nothing to be afraid of. Four pillars firmly straddle the meadow, at least six feet tall, gray, warm to the touch, no ivy curls around them, nor does any old man's beard creep up them, which is strange indeed, in this mountainous region as soon as a seed finds even an inch of soil it immediately takes root and will shoot up crooked if need be, but not there. The house itself sits on these supports with its pointed red-tiled roof, white curtains and window boxes full of geraniums. They say that back in the day it stood on chicken feet and could turn from side to side to keep an eye on both this world and the next, who knows how it really was, either the pillars looked like chicken feet or that was the style back then, to include at all costs elements from the animal and avian kingdoms, and besides how long has this story been told, since before we can remember, and almost everything in it is disguised for the comfort of the listeners who can tell themselves: once upon a time, but not here and now, there was this witch's house, you see, so maybe some witch decided to glom onto those folks, that's their problem, but our Mrs. Heda is a decent woman. Yet nevertheless a little tiny something remains in their consciousness, burrowing in like a worm, forcing them to knit their brows from the effort, then to shake their heads and say: come on now, the lady is quite all right, even if she's not from around here. Who of the locals would think to put their old suitcases under the pear tree to fill them with a fertilizer mixture, since, as we mentioned before, in those parts soil was hard to come by, so as to plant her tomatoes and tie the shoots to the branches of the pear tree? And what oxhearts she grows, as big as your head! She also has chickens and goats, you won't find cheese like hers anywhere, while up above, on the very top of the hill, she has made a garden of stones and whatever plants take root there, be they herbs or weeds, and every day in the heat or the snow she sits in the middle of that stone circle and meditates, freeing herself from everyday worries.

She doesn't hide anything about herself, she gladly tells about her previous life. A physicist by education. Now the kids from village, when they're having trouble at school, they go to see her, physics and math can't stump her at all, since she used to work at the Electronics Factory. After democracy came, there was no Electronics Factory, no work, her husband left her, disappeared somewhere abroad, two kids,

how they managed to survive is a whole other story. Later it came to light that there was another man, Mrs. Heda decided to get divorced for his sake, she must have been out of her right mind to imagine that he would have her, unemployed as she was and with two not-yet-grown sons. And she, in order to make some money, wrote students' master's theses for them, sold books on Slaveykov Square, after which she would clean one floor of an office nearby, then shopping, the streetcar, and a bus to her distant neighborhood, Mladost-1. Once she got home, she only had enough strength left to wash up, cook, feed her kids, fall asleep in front of the TV, wake up in the middle of the night and on the screen – palm trees swaying, the sea sparkling blue, beautiful people drinking cocktails through straws, Lord almighty, where could that world be...

And here she discovered astrology.

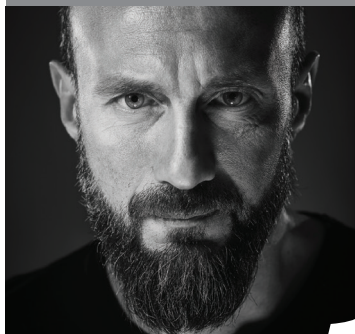
She would sit all day long on Slaveykov and for lack of anything else to do, she would read books, otherwise she'd die of boredom, she wasn't exactly mobbed by customers. They'd pass by, glance at the books a bit, sigh, the books were expensive, and they'd try to steal whatever had caught their eye. But not from Mrs. Heda. Those tricks didn't work on her, no casual movements escaped her gaze, she would fix that gaze of hers on a brazen hand until it jerked back as if burned, some people even complained that their hands went numb, they couldn't feel them. Anyway, her mathematical mind delighted in the well-ordered cosmic system that was rejected by modern science yet was capable of explaining certain things in life that science had no way of explaining, and she downright devoured everything on the subject, as if there had been a huge absence in her life or knowledge and possibilities had dwelled within her, awaiting the proper time.

It was also on Slaveykov that she ran into a former co-worker, the woman had started working at a newspaper, a women's weekly if you can believe it, but what of it – a person's got to eat, right, and Heda arranged to write horoscopes on contract. The bad thing was that at that time a new newspaper would spring up out of nowhere, launder some money and then go out of business, but Mrs. Heda became famous, people started seeking her out, including private individuals, businessmen. They were bashful about it, they would never admit it, but they still wanted to know what was in the stars for them and Heda, mostly for fun, also learned to read Tarot cards, as well as coffee grounds, palms, and believe or not, puddles. For one man. She had done up her hair, gotten dolled up, they were going out for coffee. Back then she still wanted to get remarried, or at least not to be alone, to have a shoulder to lay her head on in the evenings, that kind of thing, and here this guy, without meaning to, stepped in a puddle. She glanced down at it absent-mindedly, but she

noticed a thing or two, swirling there around his shoe, she squatted down on the sidewalk, people were bumping into them, getting angry, and she – oof, where was that brain of hers when she needed it! – she told him what she saw. He doubled over with laughter, made fun of her about it the whole evening, he didn't believe her, but later, much later he told her how thankful he was. And that was that. She was upset! No matter how many times she went over it, replaying what had happened in her head, she always came to the same conclusion that she had to tell him, she just had to tell him, and the fact that he got scared of her, well... that was to be expected. The heartbreak caused her to start writing poetry, she filled up a whole notebook, she felt better and surprise, surprise! she couldn't keep her poems to herself, it turned out that she most definitely wanted to read them to lots of people so that they would be enraptured, too, and wouldn't you know, they were.

When the sickly Ivan first came to live with her, she once recited one of her poems to him, that's how Heda is, she likes to show off, plus she also wanted to show him that everyone gets down in the dumps sometimes, but that, too, can lead to good things. He listened to her, his eyes fixed on his sneakers. What a fucking load of crap, he said finally, that isn't poetry at all, but... his face twisting as if he would vomit, don't read that stuff in front of people, he went on, you'll make a fool of yourself.





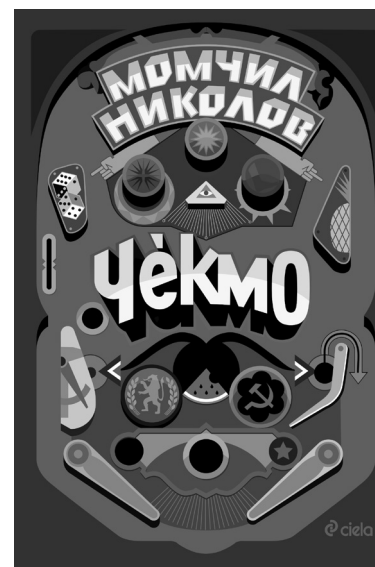
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## NIKOLOV, Momchil

Momchil Nikolov was born on September 16, 1970. He has graduated in medicine but he mainly writes. He is the author of a few short story collections: *Travelers*, *Short Stories*, *Fragments of a Room*, *Mad Doris*, and the novels *Hash Oil*, *The Top Floor*, *The Spherical Fish*, *Machinery for Love*, and *The Final Territory*. In 2008, *The Spherical Fish* won the Helicon Prize for contemporary Bulgarian fiction. His novel *The Final Territory*, published in 2016, was nominated for all the significant Bulgarian literary awards. It won the prestigious 2017 Novel of the Year Award of the 13 Centuries Bulgaria National Endowment Fund, and the 2017 Peroto Award for Prose from the National Book Centre, NPC. In the end of 2019, he has published his most recent novel, *Chekmo*, which has also been nominated for several literary awards – the Novel of the Year Award of the 13 Centuries Bulgaria National Endowment Fund, as well as the annual awards of the *Culture Portal*. In addition to fiction works, Momchil Nikolov writes TV and cinema scripts.

## CHEKMO

### SYNOPSIS



A confessional life story – every bit as wild, entertaining and absurd as its inspiration: Chekmo. A story about a colorful character – perhaps not a genius, but an excellent scammer nonetheless – who has become the spokesman of a generation, having lived on both sides of the Transition. The last years of Socialism in Bulgaria with all its absurdities, humiliations, amusements and all sorts of illegal schemes for making money – underground gambling, currency exchange scams and countless tricks, mastered to perfection, for making easy money in hard times.

An adventurer with his own life philosophy who is ready to hurl himself into any new undertaking, Chekmo does not hesitate to travel to East Berlin only days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, where new scams and new adventures await him. A city on the border between two worlds and two eras offers almost unlimited opportunities. There Chekmo meets the love of his life, Teodora, and the two of them continue on their journey together through the refugee camps of a Germany that is being reborn and the army bases of NATO, through the degrading fight to accumulate capital in Bulgaria, and all the way to the heavenly beaches of New Zealand and Australia. A breathless and endless adventure from the panel-block apartment complexes of socialist Bulgaria to the movie sets of the TV shows “Hercules” and “Xena, Warrior Princess,” where you will meet gamblers, speculators, fledgling mafiosos, generals, trained rats, cannibalistic gold fish and emigrants opening portals to the beyond. Because Chekmo is a hero for those who are searching, those who resist, those who adapt, those who speak the truth and who live on scams, for young men and women who are eternally running and always returning, in love with freedom. And because life is irresistible, wonderful and makes every minute of suffering and every minute of love worthwhile.

Novel, 520 pages

ISBN: 9789542830696

Ciela Norma, 2019

## EXCERPT

*translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel*

By March 1990 not much was left of the Berlin Wall. There, where the remnants still jutted up, tireless Africans, thin as skeletons, hammered away at it, trying to chip off some piece of concrete left between the finger-thick metal reinforcements. They sold them for between five and ten marks, depending on the size. The Vietnamese, who were everywhere, dressed in black jumpsuits and quick as ninjas, were hiding in the bushes, selling American cigarettes and changing money. Russians and all the other folks there, from the Soviet republics, were doing a brisk trade in military uniforms, hats with earflaps and Gorbachev nesting dolls; East German flags of all sizes were also selling like hotcakes. There were Poles, Serbs, Czechs, Chinese, Albanians, Romanians, Senegalese, you name it. East Berlin was the border between two worlds. One was retreating, the other was advancing. As for us – we were making money off both of them.

Alexanderplatz, the largest square in Europe, had been turned into a flea market – the mother of all flea markets. There you could find anything – from Walkmans to military radios, from Trabant mirrors to a whole tank. All sorts of languages were spoken, there was buying, selling, trading; it was chaos, out of which everyone emerged satisfied in the end.

We traveled by train for two days from Bulgaria, we took two days to settle in and get ourselves oriented, and on the third day we were already going around to the Gypsies on Alexanderplatz looking for passports. Let me explain: at that time, every citizen of the People's Republic of Bulgaria could exchange thirty Bulgarian levs for thirty East German marks. To that end, you needed to fill in a special customs declaration, insert it in a red passport, put thirty levs inside and go to the bank. There they took your declaration and your levs and would give you thirty East German marks in return. However, those East German marks – are here is the key – could be immediately exchanged for West German marks at a one-to-one exchange rate. So you take them, get on the subway, travel two stops and voila – you're already in West Berlin. There was a checkpoint – those serious Germans were patrolling it with their serious German shepherds – but they would let us through; when they saw our Bulgarian passports, they just waved us through, go on, schnelle, schnelle.

So we could get through, but the East Germans couldn't, they still weren't letting them cross completely freely. And here is the trick, here is the hustle. With those thirty West German marks you buy some Chinese Walkmans in bulk from

warehouses in West Berlin or whatever else you could buy there, you get back on the subway, two stops, get off at Alexanderplatz and sell it for three times as much. They, the East Germans, starved as they were for western goods, had gone downright berserk – not reactive psychosis but straight-up mania had gripped the entire East German population. Walkmans, boomboxes, blow dryers, it didn't matter – you were guaranteed to sell them for a huge profit.

It was mainly the Gypsies, our Bulgarian ones and the Romanians, that ran this hustle with small home appliances. Wheeling and dealing is their thing, right, it's in their genes: take this Lambada watch, mister, buy that mixer there, gimme twenny marks, fiddy marks. There were also thieves among them, pickpockets, they'd go around to case the stores for gold jewelry – necklaces, rings, the Germans were up in arms over them. We, however, had no talent for theft, and we didn't feel like mucking around with trade. Lugging various appliances on the S-Bahn and U-Bahn, making the rounds of flea markets, haggling in Russian with middle-aged Damen und Herren, thanks, but no thanks. That petty trade was beneath our dignity on the one hand, while on the other – the western world was such a huge shock that I didn't feel comfortable in the West, at least not in the beginning. 'Cause you think you're prepared, what is there really to see in that West? Haven't we seen a ton of movies, plus we've been to the Corecom hard-currency stores, we've drunk whiskey and worn Rifle jeans – how different could it really be, at least in theory? Yeah, but theory and practice are two very different things. You get on that subway in East Berlin and there everything is OK: the dingy tan paneling, tiles the color of shit, flickering lightbulbs. There are no ads, no music, no nothing. People dressed more or less the same have cued up in a fifty-meter-long line to buy a newspaper, that's what they're used to; one woman has come with a cart in front of a tin booth and she's selling newspapers; everyone gives her their pfennigs, prepared with exact change so as not to slow the line, order and discipline. And afterwards all those people cram like robots in military formation onto the subway and simultaneously open one and the same paper, they unfold it, read, no one takes any liberties, there's no monkey-business.

And when you get on at that subway station – where it's exactly as if you're in the tunnel under the National Palace of Culture in Sofia – and afterwards when you get off in West Berlin, the difference is so enormous that it hits you like a hammer between the eyes. With those lamps shining, with those ads gleaming, for Opel, Audi, BMW, and Lord knows what else; stores for shoes, for newspapers and cigarettes, there was even a green grocer at that West German subway stop. And it was totally stocked, the stands were literally overflowing – bananas, oranges, apples and various other

fruit, so exotic that I had no idea what they were. I thought to myself: this store must be some kind of, you know, show-store, surely those westerners have put this horn of plenty right here as a demonstration of sorts, to freak us out. But then – as the escalator was taking us up – we found ourselves in a completely new world, as if that escalator was taking us from the Underworld to the Upper one, if you get what I’m saying. It’s supposedly still Berlin, but the sun somehow shines brighter, everything looks orderly and arranged as if in an exhibit. The streets are clean, the buildings painted. Here, too, Germans live, but they look different – smiling, beautiful, well-fed, wearing new clothes. In short: the whole thing is very suspicious, as if these folks here are actors and they’ve put them in some ritzy city set to play out some scenes for us, to demonstrate prosperity and high living standards. It literally made my head spin, I felt sick. As for Ero, the West hit him right in the stomach, not in the head like me, that must’ve been his weak spot. I wanna eat, he said. What do you want to eat, my man? Salami, he says, I want to eat, I’m suddenly starving. So we set out to find a grocery store and buy salami. And so we’re walking down those wide streets, completely unable to believe our eyes: store upon store, and every single one like Corecom. One sells TVs, another cameras, a third watches, a fourth clothes; only western goods, these glitzy shop windows all lined up, it makes you want to start smashing them one after another, I honestly don’t know how these people here can stand looking at all this stuff and not wanting to snatch it. Erol and I trade glances, we don’t say it out loud, but it’s 100% certain that we’re both thinking it: this can’t be real! Just try to understand where we’re coming from: when your eye is used to seeing shops with only tin cans of green beans and plastic oil-and-vinegar sets, it is slightly shocking to see all that abundance. It seems impossible and unfair to have so much here, while back at home there’s nothing, for goods and products to be so unequally distributed. On the other hand, all the dignity you have and which you’ve been building up over a lifetime suddenly disappears, it deflates. You start to feel like some small and insignificant person and doubts overwhelm you. And you say to yourself: Whoa, is it going to turn out that the whole life that I’ve been living up until now was some fake reality, which has nothing to do with the real one? And you’re thinking, mulling it over: now these people, these well-fed and rosy-cheeked Germans who can have all of this just like that, they must be way smarter than me and than all of us who line up to wait for offal; not that I’ve ever waited in line for offal, mind you, but Danche regularly went to the Rhodope store to wait for some liver or kidneys.

And at the same time you’re both slightly ashamed for being such a loser, but also angry at those who already have and can buy everything you’ve ever dreamed about.

You hate them automatically, without them ever having done anything in particular to you. And the cars! We saw a store with a brand spanking new Opel Cadet in the window! And they’d stuck a cardboard sign with the price on it; you go in, count off your marks and come out with a new car. Whereas in Bulgaria you wait for fifteen years and finally you end up having to compromise either on the brand or the color.

However, the biggest shock we experienced during that first stroll in West Berlin was in the supermarket. We found some supermarket, enormous. I personally had never even imagined that such an abundance of food could exist. Fifty different kinds of bread, twenty kinds of salt, thousands of chocolates, cakes, ice creams, you name it. These huge shelves heaped from top to bottom with stuff. You just walk along blinking like crazy, ‘cause your head is literally spinning, it’s hard to walk in a straight line, that’s how serious the vertigo from all that abundance is. And when we reach the salami, my heart was about to stop, I shit you not! There was about a hundred yards of cooler cases, overflowing with all kinds of meat and sausages: ham, salami, hot dogs, blood sausage, pate; baked or smoked or raw or cured or whole or sliced. You get the feeling that this is some kind of dream – sort of amazing, sort of nightmarish, sort of unreal all at the same time. On the one hand you want to wake up, on the other you are ready to stay here forever – that’s how much the scents wafting off this stuff intoxicates you, these unearthly visions enchant you to such an extent that you are rooted to the spot. You stand there like some kind of statue, teleported as if in “Blake’s Seven” from Real Socialism to Real Capitalism; and you can’t move, you’re frozen, your legs won’t listen to you.

That’s for the first few seconds. But then, we’re Bulgarians after all, right? Our brains start churning out the suspicion and doubt. Who the hell could need all that meat, bread and sweets, hm? Could all of this even be eaten? Could everything really be this nice, easy and wonderful? It can’t, your sound Bulgarian brain tells you, there’s some kind of catch here, some scam. It’s probably some fake reality of theirs, which the westerners are trying to pawn off on you – with all these cooler cases and sausages – it just simply can’t be true.

I glance at Erol, and he, brothers and sisters, is in even worse shape than I am. He’s squatting down, one hand is on his stomach, the other is clutching a shelf. He’s gone pale, beads of sweat cover his forehead, his eyes are darting left and right, he isn’t saying a word. I grab him under the arm – I haven’t asked him what the matter is, it’s clear as day to me – and I help him get up, about-face and step-by-step: towards the exit.

We left the store without salami, I mean, if we’d stayed even five more minutes we could’ve had a fatality on our hands. Walking quickly, almost running, like a horse with blinders, not looking at anything around us: to the subway and back

to East Berlin, we teleported ourselves back to our own reality; when we saw the shit-brown tiles, the broken lamps and the police uniforms we calmed down a bit. We went outside, bought ourselves hot dogs with rolls and mustard, drank a Vita cola and finally our souls settled back into our bodies. We watched the Zigeuner on Alexanderplatz – they're scamming the rubes with a shell game – we're happy to see them: Gypsies, but our Gypsies, Bulgarian, socialist Gypsies.

They were the ones, our Gypsies from Alexanderplatz, who supplied us with passports. 'Cause you can photocopy all the customs declarations you want, but with only one passport how much money are you going to make? How many banks can you hit up in one day, keeping in mind that the distances are huge, as are the lines in front of the teller windows. Even if you are a busy bee, going from bank to bank as if buzzing from flower to flower, your results in the end will be quite humble; I mean, how much honey does a single solitary bee gather, even if it is a hard-working Bulgarian bee? Not much, that's how much.

So back then we bought around thirty red passports from the Gypsies, they controlled that business as well, with the passports. Now whether they had bought them, whether they'd stolen them, whether they'd gotten them some other way – not exactly legal and perhaps involving force – I really couldn't say; besides, I didn't ask, the less you know about such things, the better. The Gypsy we bought them from – a dark dude from Sliven who was big as a buffalo – said: it's all good, bro, you won't have any problems, the passports are the real thing, I can guarantee it. And we didn't have any problems whatsoever. We copied a shitload of declarations – on Marx-Engels Platz we found a cheap copy shop, where two twin sisters worked, we called them Karla and Marla, although I'm absolutely certain those weren't their names – and we filled out those forms all night by hand at the hotel, I got frickin' arthritis in my hand from all that writing. And it might've been OK if at least the hotel was quiet – we're doing intellectual labor, right? it takes concentration – but no such luck, there the nightlife was raging around the clock. Let me explain: so the hotel, the way it was situated, our windows looked out into an inner courtyard that was surrounded by buildings like ours – seven or eight stories. Our building was a hotel, while the others – who knows what they were. From the outside they looked the same – façade worn down almost to the bare brick, beat-up, dirty, with narrow windows with ledges and sills covered in pigeon shit. In one of these buildings across from us lived normal German families, all elderly people – our windows are only a few meters apart, right, so we can see everything. Humble folks – they sit down to dinner, eat their knedli, take their pills, watch TV and go to bed; zero problems where they are concerned. In the other two buildings – across from each other in

the square courtyard – this was not the case. These buildings had been abandoned, that much was clear – windows broken, boarded up with crosses of plywood, no electricity, no nothing. But some punks had moved in to both of them. All night long – music and shouting. And if you haven't heard punks screaming in German, you haven't heard anything. So those guys were yelling all night, talking from the windows, cursing, tossing empty bottles at each other, puking, pissing, you name it. In the morning – the same thing all over again, with the added bonus that you could also see their ugly mugs.

There was one guy there who came to the window every morning to smoke. With a leather jacket, upside-down crosses hanging from his ears and a rat on his shoulder. A rat, I'm telling you, a big sucker, well-fed, chubby; and it just sat there on his shoulder as if glued to the spot. How he trained it I have no idea, I mean, it's a rat, not a parrot. So the punk would be smoking and from time to time he'd give a drag to the rat, he'd stick the cigarette in its mouth, but the rat – how much could it really smoke? – just slobbered all over the filter. And that same wisenheimer with the rat was the only one of all the punks in the two buildings who had a watch. Now, I don't know why a punk would need to know exactly what time it is, but these are German punks after all, clearly this was important to them. And so our man with the rat and the watch would come to the window at the top of every hour, start cuckooing like a cuckoo-clock and announcing the time. He never slacked off, he might be drunk as a skunk, just been puking his guts out, having sex, sleeping – it didn't matter – at the top of every hour he came to the window to cuckoo and announce the exact time; thanks to him I learned all the numbers in German – ein, zwei, drei and so on until twelve.

He really bugged the shit out of Ero. He was like: c'mon, let's jump that freak, kick his ass, take his watch and kill his rat. And I would keep talking him down: there's a lot of them, I'd say, they're aggressive, I'm 100% sure they've got weapons, they'll crush us if we mess with them. Plus, the cops might get called and there goes our scam.

And that scam of ours – it was golden. Just do the math: we fill out as many declarations as we possibly can during those wild Berlin nights, take the passports and we're off – to bank numero uno, where we pretend to be tour guides. In other words, those thirty passports and that money that we bring to change, belong to the "tour group" that we're leading. And the people at the teller window, they don't ask anything. Scowling, glooming, angry, but they keep quiet. They take the declarations, they take the thirty levs that we've put inside the passports in advance and they give us marks in return; thirty fake tourists times thirty – 900 marks.

We gather up the passports, cash in the marks and again fill the passports up with levs and declarations – we carried out this operation in a café, it had a very nice terrace, right next to the Spree River. We would drink a mocha to freshen up and then we'd be off again – to bank numero due, where the whole procedure would be repeated. And voila – another 900 marks in our pockets. In the meantime it would have gotten to be around two or three in the afternoon, we'd sit down to eat something, to drink a beer and if we were not too lazy and we still had filled-out declarations, we might hit up one more bank; sometimes we did, sometimes we didn't, it all depended on how we felt.



## RADEVA, Yanitsa

**Yanitsa Radeva** is the author of the novels *The Candy Dish* (2011), *The Season of Yoana* (2015), *The Road to Thebes* (2017), and *Greetings from Hades* (2020). In 2012, she was awarded a diploma from the Ministry of Culture for her novel *The Candy Dish*. *The Road to Thebes* was nominated for national literary awards, including the Novel of the Year of the 13 Centuries Bulgaria National Endowment Fund and the Elias Canetti Prize for Fiction. She is the recipient of several national literary prizes for poetry and short stories. Her works have been translated into Croatian, Romanian, English, Korean, and Persian. She has a PhD in literature.



### GREETINGS FROM HADES

SYNOPSIS

*Greetings from Hades* is an elaboration on the myth of Oedipus and his descendants. The story is told by three narrators – Manto, the daughter of the prophet Tiresias and a priestess; Ismene, the daughter of Oedipus; and the soldier Agathon. Their stories present life in Thebes over the course of twenty years and show each of their different fates. An important figure for the novel is the soldier Aristodemus, who has no lineage and who chooses his own fate. He is Oedipus' alter ego.

Novel, 208 pages  
ISBN: 9786191865697  
Janet-45 Publishing House, 2020

## EXCERPT

*translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel*

### AGATHON

Agathon, the time has come for us to billow the sails of anguish, today the time has come for us to suffer as well! Agathon, Manto told me, take your children, let you and your wife prepare. Our city will no longer be ours at the end of this day! By its end our spirit will bleed along with the sunset, as Thebes will lose many men today, Agathon, but she will need others to become the foundations of a new city. So tell your wife to take your most precious things, and you, who was once a herald, please tell the people to gather in the agora as soon as they can! Tell them that this is what Apollo wishes, there is no time for anything else, and besides, they don't need to know more. Be on your way, Agathon, as the hours will not suffice for everything, and I must fetch my father!

As if talking in her sleep, that was how Manto spoke that day when the Epigoni were beneath the city walls and we, as before, were preparing to repel them. In the morning I had seen the spearmen heading towards their weapons, the warriors from the Sacred Band had already strapped on their armor and swords, and young Laodamas was striding towards them. But now, even before the sun had risen high in the sky, Manto had seen bad omens. Otherwise she would not have come to my home, she rarely visited us, even though after Aristodemus' death my family, and particularly my wife, had earned her attention and when my daughter was born, Manto brought the child a coin left to her by her mother, she said, let your Hestia receive it from Manto, when the day comes for her to be a bride. And now, my little girl had not yet taken her first steps and Manto was telling us to gather our things and leave what we had been building up over generations. The house's hearth would be extinguished, its spirit would be dead, and we – if we survived – would erect a new one in a strange place, and the home that my father had expanded, which my grandfather had built, would be destroyed or new people would move into it who were not accustomed to such possessions. We gathered up what we could, many things were left on the floor, we could not fit them all, but we did not forget the coin from Manto. I settled my son onto the mare with the bundles, I told him not to be

afraid, we were going on a journey, the boy was happy and clutched his slingshot, while Hestia sought her mother's gaze, and so are we, my wife said, and she and the girl got on the other horse, which was loaded with food. The slave grasped the reins, and I had no one to look to so as to calm myself and to let my blood run like a man's, I led them calmly to the agora, but I could feel that I was trembling inside. What a child you have become, Agathon, I thought, get a hold of yourself, not even ten winters have passed since you were in your helmet at the gates with Aristodemus! That's what I was thinking and I didn't hear that the people around me were like an agitated flock of birds. Some had presciently tossed their children over their shoulders like sacks, later I, too, would carry my daughter on my back. I looked for Manto and Tiresias, there was no one else to ask when we were leaving. We would go out through the secret exit. Manto was waiting for a sign from the birds, however, I was not looking towards the sky, but listening to the ever-louder noise coming from the Ismenian Gates and my ears became eyes, and it was as if I was seeing the spears shattering bone, the horses falling with their riders, knives dyed crimson, chariots overturning towards the sky and then setting off across it. Tiresias, too, had turned his head in that direction and was listening to the battle. The sharp tip of the battering ram pierced the body of our fortified wall and every blow echoed in my stomach. Since I could hear the Epigoni so clearly, that meant they had broken through our line of shields and their swords rang out dangerously close. Manto, catching my eye, came over to me and said, her voice pleading and anxious: Agathon, Ismene isn't here, but you can hear the din and the carrion-feeding birds are circling, ready for prey – we need to leave, we cannot expose the Thebans to danger. The ones entering must find an empty city, because he who takes a city where even the temples have been deserted is not a victor. I will look for Ismene and we'll catch up with you. As you well know, you must immediately take to the woods, do not turn back to gaze upon the battlefield behind you, look instead towards Apollo's sacred stone, tell everyone that, the woods starts beyond it and there you shall be as safe as in the womb. And even if the Epigoni charioteers spot you, do not allow anyone to stop, after all you men know that they cannot pursue you between the trees, while their heavy armaments are disastrous amidst the brush. And then keep walking until Tiresias tells you otherwise. I ask only one thing of you, hold him up, he likes to show a firm step, but he is already weak, I know you have your family to worry about, but I won't be long."

How could I say no to Manto, I did not want to leave her alone, how could I say no to Tiresias? I won't be alone, she read my thoughts. But she would be, and we both knew it. Then Creon approached us and said, Manto is right, she will not be

alone. And the city cannot be left completely empty, without a representative who, as soon as the Epigoni enter, shall mock them, even though you come to conquer, we do not surrender, we have outfoxed you. I don't want to be a hero, he said in a tired voice, I have never been one, besides in the tragedy of my own life, I'm not going anywhere, everything I have is here and it cannot be carried elsewhere, here are the graves of my sons, here I buried my wife and here my daughter blossoms like a flower bursting from the earth in spring. Here I lost them and only here can I remember them, if I am meant to burn up along with Thebes and for my bones to lie with theirs, so be it. I looked at Creon, his face had lost the shape I had known, time had taken everything from this man. He had not appeared in public for years, how had he lived, I had forgotten about him since the day we buried the Argives and Polynices. He had put on his newest clothes and they were not clothes for travelling. Now he was coming to die. Can you really deny someone the right to die? Before losing them forever, I turned to see them. Manto looked like a statue next to him, her body seemed to be shivering from the uncertainty she was left in, while Creon was not awaiting his death, he was already dead, only his body did not know it yet.

None of the Epigoni noticed us when like a swarm of ants we came out of the secret exit. The children were silent, as if they had sensed that nearby the Moirai were cutting the wounded's threads, turning them into shades. For the last time we were walking through the environs of our city, even the babes in swaddling could feel it. It was a fine day, not a day for farewells, but are there ever any days suited for that? The forest was in full leaf – it sheltered us under its peplos, it hid us. They would realize that we had left when they thought to look for the inhabitants. They would discover several old people and Creon. He would stand before them like a stump that the storm had neglected to topple. He would speak for the last time and utter his most grandiloquent speech so as to mock them to their faces as only he could. I imagined him there, where Oedipus used to gather us to hear his speeches, standing on the steps in front of the palace, where we would strew olive branches in his honor. This ritual has long since been forgotten, but Creon, I am certain, would remember everything and would play his part like an actor, that was why it was those clothes he had put on. Perhaps that was also why no one noticed us as we entered the woods, everyone was watching the strange elderly man who had something to impart to them and surely imparted was imparting it to them in such a way that their heads felt like turtle shells tossed down from a height.

And we walked. We had loaded Tiresias and the other helpless elderly folks like him on the horses with the children and the luggage, so we wouldn't be slowed down. When it was finally dark enough, I turned in the direction of the city and

saw nothing. Thebes was sunk in darkness, the soldiers had not yet lit a fire or a conflagration, and perhaps, carried away in their looting, they hadn't realized when night had fallen.

The next day we did not wait for Manto. Ismene did not come, either. We never heard anything about Oedipus' daughter, while various bits of news would come about Manto, but so contradictory that I couldn't decide what was true. Some said she had given birth to a son and a daughter by Alcmaeon, who had kidnapped her, that her daughter was a beauty, while her son showed promise as a military commander. Others would say that the Argives had carried her off as a trophy, but that was so unbelievable that I refused to listen.

We kept walking and fed ourselves from the blessings found along our way. Whatever we hunted we split up into small morsels, while the season was generous with fruit. We kept the grain to sow the lands of our new home, while the flour was only for the women and children. Whenever we found asphodel, we tore off its white flowers and dug up its tubers and so dulled our hunger just as our forefathers had in the kingdom of the shades. And Tiresias was like an overgrown child who wanted to hear news of Thebes, but did not utter a word. He slowly chewed the bite of food I placed in his hand. People kept asking: Where to? They asked me, too, you called us together, they would say. And they were saying this ever louder, because their exhaustion was growing, while their hope was dwindling. And when their voices reached Tiresias, he said to my son, lead me, and he got up, as impressive as in his best years, he had gathered his strength and was grasping his staff. He spoke such that everyone heard him and remembered everything. His voice did not waver and everyone understood him. Our wise man said that we must walk until we see a pig. The pig would shine as brilliantly clean as a lamb. We must catch it, it would not resist when we sacrificed it, and then we would build a city in that place. Name it for the goddess of the home, who will lead you towards your new hearth, he said, and then pour libations of wine and water just as she likes. Then take out the tools you are carrying and build your city anew in the memory of Thebes. This is what the old man said, and we all wanted to ask him whether we would be walking for a long time, but we didn't dare. His words were so fine, words that led us somewhere and pointed to the way out! For that reason we swallowed back our questions and voiced our thanks. We thought we would be able to ask him later, for now let us embrace our wives and let them melt into our embraces. The next day we reached that lake from which Tiresias bent down to drink the cold water and whether the water was the reason or the exhaustion or his time had come, in any case his spirit flew away. He remained motionless, leaning on his staff, stiff and stark. He looked as if he had

sat down before the crystal waters to look around and skip stones. The sun sought for fire in his extinguished eyes and just like myself it could not believe that Tiresias was gone. He who had always been was no more. He burned out like our city. We buried him by the lake and remembered the place. A bird alighted on the grave, as if watching over him. And we set off once again and no longer had anyone to ask how much longer we would walk and in which direction. We just hurried to leave Boeotia, which had been scorched by the Epigoni.

On the way my daughter took her first steps, and on the way said her first words. One morning, when the asphodel had long since run out and along the path, which wound along a wide river, we found the green watermelon rinds sown by the birds, the child told me, look. I didn't know what she was pointing at, but she kept saying look and tugging at my hand. She couldn't tell me what to see because she didn't know the word, so she started leading me and then in some bushes I saw the pig. I could have sworn that it was the most beautiful animal I had ever seen, even though pigs are not usually famed for this quality. We slaughtered and roasted it. While we ate, we poured out wine for the goddess Hestia, while my wife placed the coin from Manto in my hand. "My daughter will find her bridegroom here, and the foundations will be laid with a blessed gift." And so we placed the coin in the first temple dedicated to Hestia, and we founded the city Hestiea.

I believe we governed our city wisely. We gathered in the agora and speculated over what was best. I had heard that in other places, too, the citizens had begun doing so. Regardless of whether it wanted to or not, the world would always find the solution to its troubles in the experience of those who had gone before. Because after our two wars, others would come and like a fire they would blaze up and their furnace would swallow up sons like so many morsels. The signs of the wars would change, the stigmas would be different, but they would always bring one and the same horror. The backs of the horsemen, who generations later would race along our roads, would be broken by the weight of the centuries. But the reason for man to go against man would remain one and the same. With one and the same words leaders would find justification for death – you must kill, so as not to be killed, their hoarse voices would shout, the enemy was the first to say: die!

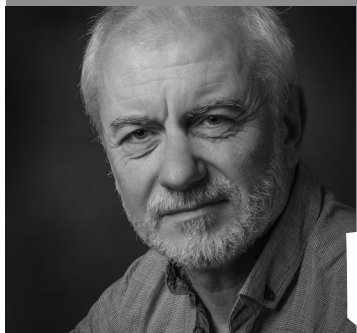
But just then, when a man is surrounded by his own ruin and the ruin of the world he knows, his body recalls another rhythm, older than our statues, which our descendants will smash. For this reason it is better to come together with others, to seek ideas about what is good and to act according to them, while leaning on the staff of the past, which keeps everyone on the path to the future, just as the blind Oedipus and the limping Oedipus and also the ruler Oedipus, when he leaned on

his scepter. And just as Oedipus did not escape what Pythia had presaged, so, too, a man cannot live forever in harmony, yet he must strive to muffle that voice which says kill so as not to be killed!

Our homes grew up again, as did our workshops, and our Boeotian horses began to multiply and our women began to give birth. We tied our swords to our plows and turned them into tools for life and from the grain an army of wheat-ears sprang up, whose full heads wagged wisely when our thoughts were good. The vine seedlings which someone had brought from Thebes spread our city's fame. Winemakers from the nearby villages sought us out, they generously bought our vines and wine even in Eumolpia, a rich city rising up on its beautiful hills. I married my daughter off there and told her about Manto before she set out for her husband's home.

I died on the day when my son's son, adorned as a laureate just as I had been in my childhood, recited a paean. He had studied the words long and diligently and spoke them with pleasure. His voice was mellifluous, and I remembered the streets of Thebes, that sunny day when people's eyes had looked upon me with delight, just as they now looked upon my grandson, to whom I had given my name. I could say that despite everything, I lived a happy life. But it is wiser for a man not to speak of such things. And so thinking, my soul left me and crossed over into the kingdom of the shades. I understood this from the fact that I could make out the words of the ancient spirits who rustled in the trees and in the reeds along the river. I heard people who had lived before me. Like buds on the branches of the trees were those who would be born centuries later and who would hear my voice as a rustling on the wind in their borderless world. And there truly were no borders. The dead and the living lived together and this is how it would be. I looked around and saw Aristodemus. He strode towards me with a spring in his step.





# S

## STANKOV, Ivan

Ivan Stankov was born in 1956. He graduated in Bulgarian Philology from Veliko Tarnovo University. He is a professor in Bulgarian literature. His fiction books include: *Memories of Water: Dm* (2014), winner of the second prize for prose of the *Culture Portal*; *Streets and Ships: Gm* (2017), recipient of the Special Award for literature from the *Communitas Foundation*; as well as *Names Beneath the Snow: A7* (2019).

### NAMES BENEATH THE SNOW

#### SYNOPSIS

The stories in the collection *Names Beneath the Snow: A7* are tales about love, about death and about loneliness. They tell of the past fifty years, with all of their monstrous transformations, illusions and ineradicable hopes.

The main characters in *Names Beneath the Snow: A7* live as immigrants in large European cities. Most of them are Bulgarians. One of them is an artist in Paris, another is a musician in Budapest, yet another is a medical worker in Munich, a receptionist in Krakow, a bartender in Madrid, a welder in Bratislava, a university lecturer in Bucharest. All of them have left their homeland for good, but they return there frequently in their memories. In the final story, one of them, a

musician on a cruise ship along the Danube who lives in Regensburg, on his final trip down the river finds a depopulated Bulgaria turned into a frozen glacier. He digs down into the snow and beneath it finds gravestones for all the people who had lived in these lands, including those like himself who are still alive, but who have left Bulgaria far behind.

The book *Names Beneath the Snow: A7* (2019) is the third and final indivisible part of a trilogy of story collections. The first two parts are *Memories of Water: Dm* (2014) and *Streets and Ships: Gm* (2017).

Short stories, 180 pages  
ISBN: 978619000010005  
Faber Publishing, 2019

### EXCERPT

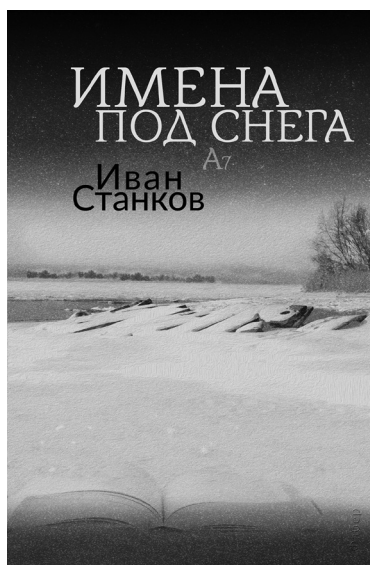
*translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel*

#### CRUMBS FOR BIRDS

All sorts of things might be written in books, but if you are a boy and you love your mother, that doesn't mean that you necessarily hate your father. Especially in a case like mine. By the way, I am not completely clear on how exactly I love my mother, since I lost her when I was two years old and all my memories of that time are stories from my dad, grandmas and grandpas and from photos from that time. I don't know if you can even love memorially, with no present tense. Clearly you can.

I don't remember anything of her funeral, I was too little, but I even have a photo from that. In dad's village they have a terrible tradition – the whole family gets together and takes a picture with the deceased in front of the church. I'm there, too, my uncle is holding me, dad is next to him, his face as white as plaster framed by his long hair, then come grandma and grandpa, mom's parents, the other relatives. In front of everyone is mom, but hardly any of her face can be seen. But you can still tell that she is very young. Later I had a father, uncle, aunt, grandfathers, and first, second and third cousins, I had everything except for a mother. It turns out, however, that that which I didn't have was something very large indeed.

The others were very careful, they tried to make it such that I wouldn't sense mom's absence. But I know what I felt when I would see the mothers coming to pick up their kids from kindergarten and how they would hug them as they gathered up their things. Dad had to hug me. It was still nice. I was always really happy to see



him, I would wait for him at the fence, I can already remember that, how I would see him through the chain-link squares. But still the old kids got hugged more softly. They would melt into their mothers' arms, while I had to be reserved, dad was always telling me to act like a man. And I poured tons of effort into it, but from time to time I wanted to be a child in its mother's arms, too! Many times I wished just once to experience that in a dream. When he noticed that I was watching some kid's mother putting on his jacket at the locker next to mine and murmuring something to him, dad's eyes would mist over slightly. He would hug me and say that I grew that day again. I would force out a laugh, and he would measure me with his hands and say, look, don't you see, you're a hand-span taller than yesterday! And later, when I was in middle school he would always hug me, without saying anything, just rubbing my back. His moustache and the fingers of his right hand smelled like smoke, and I breathed in that scent and it made me feel very secure. He has long since stopped smoking. Since we've been in Munich. First he came here and lived on his own for three years while I finished my German high school in Bulgaria and then I came to study here.

He had told me several times how mom and her favorite plant had gotten sick at the same time. It was the most average, ordinary plant, without a stem, just with long and thin green leaves that grew straight out of the pot. It didn't have any flowers, either. Pandanus, its name was something like that. After her treatments mom grew thin, and the plant grew thin, too. When mom died, the plant died, too, all its leaves fell off, only two were left, and they were barely hanging on, but between then there was some small shoot. Dad started trying to save it, he moved it to the sunniest place in any given season and watered it every day in the same way: he would pour a full glass of water, and use half of it to water the plant, then he would drink the other half. The two old leaves grew stronger, dad replanted them along with all the roots and kept watering it in that way. Half a glass of water for the plant, half a glass for him. Every day. And the plant flourished. Dad named it Natalia, after mom, and afterwards it was everywhere with us. When he left for Munich, I took up the watering ritual. When I left, too, I left it with my uncle as my father recommended.

Oh yes, about the birds. While the two of us were still living in the village and commuting to Vidin, he to work and I to school, dad looked after birds at home, all of them unusual in some way or another, even the chickens. We had two peacocks, they would stroll around the fenced-in yard like a king and queen, tossing green and blue lightning bolts with their tails and feathers, never rushing anywhere. He raised pheasants, and turkeys, too. And some very beautiful Japanese guinea-fowl, the fishermen from the village would always be stopping by to ask for some of their

feathers to use for lures. He fed the birds solely out of his hand, he had given them all names, he knew each one of their characters. He called me over to help feed them as well, come here, he said, so you learn even now that the key to love is caring. He would tell me about some Italian, Francesco, he was the patron saint of plants and birds and was merciful towards everything because – and dad said this every time – life did not begin or end with man, but continued to infinity both upwards and downwards. And where birds and plants have come together in one place, paradise immediately comes about.

When I arrived in Munich and he came to meet me, we took a train, the S1, later I would come and go with it every day, but I didn't know that then. So we get off and he says that this is our stop. I look around, the stop is called Fasanerie – the Pheasantry! I ask him whether he is now giving names to the city tram stops, and he laughs: nope, not yet. Here where the parks are now used to be the Bavarian king's pheasantry.

And yet there were still birds. He would open the kitchen window every morning and immediately five or six pigeons would fly in and he would feed them bits of bread from the palm of his hand. One was bigger, he had named him Kosta, after the writer Konstantin Gulubov, whose last name means "pigeon" in Bulgarian and who had studied in Germany. The others were Chavo, Liza, Niko, all named after Bulgarian writers who had been here in Munich one hundred years ago and who had drunk coffee at the café that Thomas Mann also used to go. They later got used to me, too. Shortly after that dad brought me to see the café in question, on Luitpold.

And all the museums he dragged me around to, at one point I started to wonder whether there were any houses in Munich left for people to live in. We spent the most time in the two Pinakotheken, the old one and the new one. He also took me to the Haus der Kunst, Hitler's House of Art, and even to the beerhall where that guy had given his first speeches. From here, he said, one of the two greatest evils of the twentieth century began. The German people lived through a terribly bitter time. And where did the other evil start from, I asked. From the Kremlin, of course, why was I playing dumb? Dad was one of those bearded guys who at the end of '89 organized rallies against communism, I remember very well how angry and riled up he would get over politics, even though I was only ten years old back then.

My dad is not a doctor, even though they called him "Dr. Bobby" back in the village. He graduated with an associate's degree in nursing from Vratsa and in the village he helped people who needed shots urgently when the regular nurse was not around. But his soul is the soul of an artist. He writes, recites poetry, acts in plays, draws. I grew up with his pictures that he had drawn on the walls of our room. He made me

try, too, he bought me paints, brushed, he set aside a corner for me to practice on, but nothing came of it. His drawings were pretty and the painted room resembled a small Orthodox church. Across from the door there was a yellow, and I mean bright yellow Crucifixion. Another was of a raft on the Danube. That had been their raft when he and three friends from the village had set out to see where the Danube ended. On the other wall was that picture with the beautiful rocks, something like a desert, with a sinewy tree in the middle with no leaves, like a crooked brown bolt of lightning. And next to one of the rocks, a person was on his knees praying. He painted in blotches somehow, the details were not visible and everything looked unfinished. I asked him why he left his paintings unfinished. Well, he had finished them, they just looked like that because he himself was unfinished, he was neither an artist with a world of his own nor a real actor nor a real doctor.. I immediately objected, but what about the plant, the birds?

When they fired him, he gave the birds to one of the few farmers left in the village. He said he had decided to move his life elsewhere. And he would move my life, too. So that when I graduated, the globe would be mine.

Through friends he got a job as an orderly in Munich, some doctor helped him, a Bulgarian at one of the hospitals here, they still see each other once in a while even now. I still haven't asked him how much he makes so as to support me as well as paying for rent, food, and transportation. Once I anxiously dropped a hint about it to him, and he told me how could he not make ends meet, hadn't I noticed he'd stopped smoking? 'Cause here cigarettes were the most expensive thing. You give them up and you're on your way to getting rich.

Otherwise the apartment was small, but in a very nice spot. A small building, all kinds of people lived there. There was a beautiful lake five minutes away. Dad started going there every day to swim after work. Along the lakeshore geese, ducks, swans and all sorts of feathered creatures sprang up. They would come from all directions to crowd around him and would escort him to the other side of the lake and back. And when he would get out onto dry land, they would wait there in the water, he would take a few slices of bread out of his bag, crumble them up, toss them the crumbs and then speak to them very pleasantly in Bulgarian, and the birds would answer him with gentle shrieks. The first few days he didn't let me come with him, so as not to scare them off. They needed to get used to me first. And they did get used to me after a month. That year we happened to have nice weather until the middle of October, something entirely unusual for Munich. So dad and I swam as if in some unbelievable icon – God the Father, God the Son and the Holy Spirit in the form of many birds.

There, at the lake, I invited Caroline to meet dad. But the two of us met on Wienerplatz. Even before she set her things down on the table, she looked at me and stayed like that for two or three seconds. As if startled! She apologized and forcing herself to look only at her plate, she began to eat, taking little bites.

I finished my soup, but remained insistently at the table. When she, too, had finished her sausage, she lifted her small beer. She took a sip, her eyes closed against the sun and at the edges of her eyelids I noticed a fine and very sweet web of miniature wrinkles. She was clearly over thirty, she had the face of a person who had seen many things yet was still very young. Without begging her pardon, I asked her why she had been startled when she had seen me, was I really that terrifying. No, no, I just looked a lot like the younger brother of her ex-husband, who had no way of being in Munich. I lied that she, too, resembled my long-deceased mother. She asked me what about her resembled my mother, I replied your beauty, and she laughed sincerely and a little sadly. She said she was sorry for my loss. I told her that I had not memories of my mother alive and asked her whether she wasn't in the habit of drinking coffee after her lunch. She did have such a habit, and in a very particular place, no less, very nearby in a small family-run bakery, where they made all sorts of meringues.

So we went to Burkhof for the first time. After that we went back many times and it was there that she walked me through her life and her thoughts, and after every such stroll I wanted to slip in there somewhere myself, to make a little space for myself and first for her thoughts and the later for her life to begin to circle gently around me. And that really did happen. I visited her apartment. There, in bed, she once told me that in my arms she felt like a communion host, like consecrated bread, made from the simplest dough. I decided to try out dad's style and replied that her dough was not at all simple and that when I caress her I have the feeling that I am stroking a white cloud in human form. And she immediately hugged me. Was she that squishy? No, I replied. That heavenly.

Caroline had graduated in art history and had worked at the Louvre. Now she was specializing in the Danube school of German painting and she had come to Munich on some program, since the collection here was the richest. That's how I introduced her to dad beside the lake and he gaped at her. Really? Would she be willing to initiate two Balkan ignoramus into her professional secrets?

So we went to the Old Pinakothek several times with Caroline. She spoke very quietly, but her voice was still soft and deep. Were her vocal cords made of silk thread, were her lungs of velvet or perhaps her lips made every word voluminous, almost colorful? She pointed at parts of paintings with her beautiful hands, and

when we reached the works of Altdorfer, she sank into his unearthly skies and spoke to us from there, like an angel. Dad and I didn't dare utter a word, only when she explained about the Danube School he joked that we and Altdorfer were from the same school, since we, too, had been born on the Danube, but a bit further downstream from Regensburg. At Rembrandt and especially in the Rubens room he became more effusive, commenting on the light and the exultation of flesh and I noticed that Caroline was impressed, she gave him encouraging looks, which irked me a bit. Wait, these two aren't gonna...

Clearly I had every reason to feel irked. On one of the following days I was standing on the bridge over the Isar near the Alpine Museum tossing crumbs to the fish, when I saw the two of them from behind – Caroline and my father. They were walking along the path by the river and murmuring to each other. They passed by the bridge and didn't even notice me. My legs didn't buckle beneath me, my arms buckled. In them, was it in my arms that she had felt like a communion host? Was this why she had told me the day before that she would see me again in two days? Well yes, she was made of the most simple dough indeed! And it turns out that my father was the evil tempter! Rembrandt this, Rubens that, and now look what happened! The memory struck me like a bolt of lightning: the previous evening at home, after I'd introduced Caroline to him, he had told me: "That woman is too old for you. Your women are in first grade now."

I didn't have the strength to follow them. The crumbs sat absolutely pointless and useless in my palm, but I didn't have the strength to command it to pour them into the river. I wanted to turn into one of those fish that I was feeding – cold-blooded, with no emotions, no memory, no home, no skies, no love. Most important of all, no pain. I felt used, unneeded and abandoned. And infinitely alone. I had gone out with some local friends, I'd gotten drunk a few times. That night I got smashed by myself, I wished I could open up my skull and rip out everything inside it. To set off backwards like a salmon through my life, to return to the spring that is mom and there to end my life.

I got home late that night, my head was an empty as a boxcar on an abandoned set of tracks. I felt like the world was spinning, but at least it didn't hurt. The next morning I didn't go to class, my dad had left for work. I made myself tea and the world started to settle back in place, and along with it came the pain. In the afternoon I nevertheless decided to keep out date at Burkhof, to have it out with Caroline and be done with it.

I turned the corner and immediately saw her outside at the table. When she saw me, she got up and ran towards me. My harsh words to break it off retreated, uncertain.

She hugged me, kissed me, and I am watching the wind swirl some impossibly red leaves around our feet. She sat me down in the chair next to her and started telling me how yesterday she had met up with my father at his request. He had called her, he had taken the number from my phone. They had walked in the bank along the banks of the Isar near the hiking museum. I didn't say that I knew very well where they had gone from their little stroll, I simply kept silent. He had told her many things about his deceased wife, about our lives, about the plant, about the birds. And he had constantly been telling her to be careful with me, that was why he had asked her to meet him. So I wouldn't start seeing my mother in her. And most important of all. He had realized that I was crazy about her, and that she like me a lot, too, and he begged her a hundred times not to steal me away from him, to take me back to that France of hers. He couldn't be left without me or he would die. I was larger than his life itself, that's how he put it. I listened to her, I didn't even ask whether I was hearing everything right, but my arms again buckled and lay drained on my thighs. My eyes buckled as well, I saw how the red leaves hurried along with the wind towards the other sidewalk and I couldn't see anything. Gradually I reached the silk in her voice, then I saw one of her beautiful hands placed over my own on my thigh, her other hand was somehow reassuring me that there was plenty of time until she had to go back to France. And maybe she wouldn't go back at all. After all, time is an illusion, right, but just look, she and I are real.

I turned to her and saw her. She was not only real. She was very beautiful, even though she didn't look like mom. I loved them both.

The red leaves crosses back over to this side of the street, and a brownish pigeon came flitting along with them. He looked to the left and right and came over to our table. I wondered what sort of name to give him. I broke off a small corner of Caroline's meringue, put it in the palm of my hand, and invited him over in Bulgarian: "Here, Bobby, here!" Bobby came over and without hurrying, pecked at the sweet crumbs.



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## TENEV, Georgi

Georgi Tenev is a novelist and playwright. His novel *Party Headquarters* appeared in English with Open Letter Books. It won the VICK Bulgarian Novel of the Year Award (2007), and was published in Spanish in 2010 and in German (2018). His latest novel, *Balkan Ritual* (Colibri, 2019), was shortlisted for the top Bulgarian literary awards. Tenev's *Bulgarian Roses* (Colibri, 2016) has gained critical acclaim for its dark, mysterious atmosphere, and was described as a "relentless book that immerses readers in Bulgaria of the XXI century".



## BALKAN RITUAL

### SYNOPSIS

At the end of the 1970s, a Medieval Gospel is stolen from the Vatican Library. Bulgaria needs it for the preparations of a big historical celebration. The secret services hire a Turkish trafficker to smuggle the manuscript out. To their surprise, that very same man became the attempted assassin of the Pope. The year is 1981. Bulgaria stands discredited, and the entire operation with the book must be erased...

The present day: the manuscript appears again out of the blue. A peculiar web of officers from past and current secret services, scientists, historians, and archaeologists begins to unravel. Two vengeance-seeking archaeologists from the next generation uncover old secrets. A group of initiated men and

women guards mythical treasure. The gold still lies buried in an ancient mine close to Bulgaria's southern border.

Events escalate as the country is swept by a migrant wave and a new defensive fence is raised along the border. A police commissioner finds himself engulfed in a whirlpool of political and scientific passion and greed. A lone wolf, he is an ex-military man recently returned from a UN mission in Iraq. After sustaining a serious injury there, the commissioner has little to lose. He acts with military firmness and soon the criminal skirmishes turn into a war. Outside powers from the East and the West also seem interested in what is happening. Ancient books change the lives of ordinary people and work miracles. Hidden gold irradiates the minds of men with dark light.

Novel, 520 pages

ISBN: 9786190203674

Colibri, 2019

Nominated for 2020 Novel of the Year Award from the 13 Centuries of Bulgaria National Endowment Fund

Finalist for the 2019 Helicon Award

## EXCERPT

*translated from the Bulgarian by Traci Speed*

*edited by Angela Rodel*

### Part I. Interferences

From Chapters 5 and 9

Ex libris Josephi Simonii Assemani  
Codex vetustissimus in quarto  
Lectiones evangelicas Ecclesiae Slavo-Graecae

This is how the first page began, written by hand in a beautiful, elongated script...

\*

Since the end of the war, four books in total have been stolen from the Vatican Library. In two cases, these were actually pages from manuscripts, not even whole books. The third violation remains to this day an internal secret of the library. The details are uncertain, other than that the manuscript was seriously damaged in the attempt to conceal and remove it. They say it was the only surviving compilation of texts from Virgil's Aeneid. After this incident, the book is now kept in a lightproof, climate-controlled case, and the case – in a metal safe, all of this well guarded and concealed behind a low, almost nondescript door, in a little room on the first floor. The place is right behind the courtyard of the Belvedere Palace, where today naïve tourists look at sculptures and sigh in front of a copy of Laocoön and His Sons, presented to them as an original (the original is in another guarded and climate-controlled room, underground).

And then there is the fourth theft. It was not connected solely with Rome, and it was not a shock to the Vatican alone. It is here that the Bulgarian connection becomes involved. On May 28, 1977, after an inventory of the lending catalogue, the absence of rare literary specimens was determined. The volumes had been taken from the restoration office, which was used at that time as a reading room for especially vulnerable manuscripts. One book was a copy of Copernicus's *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*. An important copy, although not as exquisite as the original, which the author himself had held in his hands immediately before his death. According to legend, Copernicus awoke from a long coma, spread open the pages of the book that was his life's work, and looked at it for several minutes, after which he closed his eyes again, this time – forever. The Vatican copy of *De*

*revolutionibus orbium coelestium* was a relatively later one, produced by Germans. It remained in the archive along with the documents presented in Galileo's hearing and sentencing at his trial in 1633. The other manuscript, whose loss was established on May 28, 1977, was the so-called Codex Assemanius, named for the librarian Giuseppe Assemani the Elder. An Old Bulgarian gospel, in the Glagolitic alphabet. After this day the Codex Assemanius would exist for scholarship and for the world only in a black-and-white photocopy made sometime soon after the war by Brother Angelico's copyists in the archival laboratory. Around that time they had begun to carefully, though slowly, photocopy the most valuable originals in the library. The copy was good, but it was the only one, and there are no negatives preserved. It was made on sheets of high-quality and already aging Kodak Velox WGS 1.S paper. And has the manuscript itself been preserved? If so, where, and in whose hands? These questions remain unanswered.

\* \* \*

A person brings all sorts of troubles down on his head once he decides to seek the truth. When Pope Nicholas V established this library, the first specialist appointed was a man by the name of Lorenzo Valla. Today they would call him a "cultural detective," a specialist in forgeries. Where there's something of value, there's also a price, which means there's also a market, and thus the pope needed a person who could verify the authenticity of old manuscripts. In the Papal Palace, in the shortest of the three wings, a special chamber with darkened windows was set aside. In spite of the centuries of reconstruction, the repository always remained there between the old stone walls drawn up by Donato Bramante. Over time, the number of books increased, new walls appeared between the main walls, and the large halls were divided into smaller ones. The scholars who made use of the library's treasures got accustomed to the more modest living spaces. The break area was moved outdoors, into the courtyard in front of the Belvedere. The sleeping quarters stood in sharp contrast with the magnificence of the Vatican.

In 1977, these cell rooms were narrow and offered a -Spartan seclusion. There were two keys, one used by the guest, the other remaining in the chancery's wooden safe. In the month of May, the secretary of the dormitory had to open one of the rooms in the absence of its tenant for the first time ever. The young man's initials were A.P., and opposite his name were written titles of several books which he had taken notes on and copied. As always when especially valuable specimens were borrowed, their transport took place in a large leather case reinforced with double-stitching at the corners. This non-standard box had been produced more than thirty years ago by a book bindery in Pomezia. Its leather was cracked and almost black. Now, however,

the case lay empty on the wooden shelf. The books had not been returned. Of A.P., there was no trace.

The door was number eleven, the second-to-last one on the right down the long and usually deserted corridor. The order to unlock it had come personally from the library warden, the archbishop himself. The secretary jangled the keys, chose one, turned it, and pressed the door handle. Two librarians entered the room behind him, as vigilant as bloodhounds. They opened the small wardrobe; they found nothing. Then the drawers of the nightstand – nothing in them, either. It was only under the bed that they came across their first find. There, they found a small trunk for bedclothes. There was no handle, just a rounded opening on the right end. To raise the lid, there was a small wooden block that had to be squeezed and slid to one side. This mechanism was probably from the tenth century, at least; that's how most trunks and baggage cases closed here. The librarians opened the trunk with trembling hands. Stuffed inside were sheets and some kind of folded, graying cardboard with tattered edges. And underneath – three books. What had made him take these volumes from the repository and hide them in his room?

In the police report, there were almost no details about the young man's character. And scant information had arrived with the documents from the papal legate on the incident. In these the youth was also referred to only by his initials. The case would disappear several years later; it was strange that it didn't become as sensational as the theft of the three pages from Petrarch's manuscript. And this A.P., twenty-eight years of age, would never reappear again. Could his body be somewhere at the bottom of the Tiber? This doesn't seem to have occurred to anyone – what if the poor fool was carrying out an order from patrons further afield? How else can you explain that after his disappearance, the two most valuable of a total of five pilfered books were never discovered? Three of them – manuscripts in Latin and Georgian and a spiritual reading – were found in the linen chest. But the other two were not there. In similar cases the stolen valuables would be reunited with the owners again five or six years later – ten, at most. Somewhere along the chain of dubious middlemen and collectors, someone sufficiently decent or fearful would materialize and hand over the lucre. Sooner or later, many of the precious relics returned to their original source.

\* \* \*

Listen now. I grew up without parents. I'm Italian, or at least what you would call Italian. Actually, Sardinia is a whole other place, and the residents of the island are more Greek than Italian. At least in comparison to the Romans and the people from Milan, we aren't Italians, but that's not really important. What's important is that

Sardinia isn't a place where it's good to be poor, and I was poor. The island isn't generous to a young orphan like me. A twenty-year-old man shouldn't be blamed for giving up, for giving in to certain strong desires, for selling himself, in the end. What does he have at his disposal, otherwise? Like they say – his body. I was appealing, perhaps even handsome. I didn't go so far as to accept attention that goes against nature, but a handsome, smiling face goes a long way with so many older men who aren't indifferent to boys. This was one possible way. And the other – I waited, just waited for fate to give me a sign. I donned the cassock immediately. And I started enjoying myself. I've always secretly snickered at those people who were pious enough to believe that someone could have faith, and at the same time shallow enough as not to notice how I led them by the nose, how I didn't give rat's ass for their whole credo – I was even deeply certain: the world doesn't obey their God, but completely different forces, different laws govern it, and these forces can also be gods, but it's these, and not their One God. If it were the other way around, we would have a lot more unequivocal evidence of how the world is arranged according to a single total will and so on; I've thought about this a lot. No, never mind, forget your urge to argue, I'll spare you. I have a lot more examples of how wealth and general well-being come with absolute unfairness, and no sort of holy logic or holy order governs, neither here nor there. And again I tell you, don't blame such a young and immature man, like you yourself are now, for some peculiar sins. A young body wants life, a young man wants to conquer, to let his bodily fluids flow, to win. At least a little, at least to some extent. And with my origins and my financial situation, I was deprived of most opportunities. You're wearing the cassock, so let me explain to you what happens next. They'll use you and then it's over, they'll abandon you, they won't give you what you were expecting, what you were hoping for. Because they themselves don't believe in the things they preach, they, your mentors. Take a lesson from me.

I want you to convey to your elders, to your Sanhedrin, that I admit that I stole The Book. I don't have thirty pieces of silver, and don't think that I want to justify myself. I'm simply confessing. Why do I need to? You'll understand. I also confess that the choice was not accidental. I took the *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* to divert attention. I didn't need it, my goal was the gospel, the *Codex Assemanius*. Someone had asked for it. You can guess who, how would this book have made it to your country otherwise? How do you think it came from Rome, was it coincidence? But I'm leaving that to you. My relations with the guarantor are rather more complicated, as you'll realize. This manuscript was just the excuse for one person to appear in my life and to turn everything upside down. The guarantor had means

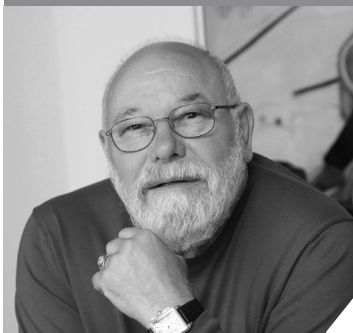
of persuasion. Things happen more easily with money, because even if it can't buy everything, it inspires confidence, and confidence can move mountains. As it says in *The Book*, right? My mentor in this operation, he had money, in cash, unmarked, clean. And the theft worked out. You don't know how easy it is to carry off the most valuable objects – it's not like taking a bottle of wine from the store. They'll catch you more easily there, but with a book like that, there's no need even to hide, you walk out slowly and solemnly, carrying the treasure on your shoulder. Now, as for the question of price. How much did they pay me? Too small a sum, but I accepted it not so much out of necessity as because of... You'll understand, if not now, then after some time. You'll grasp the problem with money, with freedom and money. I say a small sum, but this is from the point of view of relative greed, and it can be quite large, greed. I've always wanted more, and the representatives of that country, they took my financial difficulties into consideration, because twenty thousand dollars at that time was serious capital, so I shouldn't complain. At the same time, twenty thousand dollars – because I asked specifically for dollars, and not liras or even Swiss francs, even though I told them that after this I was going immediately to an Italian canton in Switzerland – so these twenty thousand couldn't fix my life completely and forever, it's just that a young man like me doesn't look ahead very far, but gets worked up by the upcoming months and even days, and makes greedy plans, so I took the money, and that was that. But besides the money, I repeat, there were other motives, too, important, if not to say more important even. I want you to explain to your elders that they shouldn't be so misguided that they don't take any interest in the way the relic ended up with them. For the motives of one person or other on the inside, from the Holy City, to wreak the kind of havoc I did. Let alone that's what our whole conversation is about.

Incidentally, I want it to be known in your capital there, for them to be informed in your Holy Synod, that when I carried the book out in the canvas backpack and had to give it by our agreement to the person who was waiting for me at the colonnade... In short, this was a man I didn't know, quite different from my mentor. They had only shown him to me once, in a café. I was there with my mentor, and this man with a gaunt face and black eyebrows, light stubble on his face, in a black blazer, appeared at the next table, I remembered him clearly. You should tell your elders, your Sanhedrin, that when I went to take the book to the entrance of the plaza at the Largo del Colonnato, this man was already waiting for me. He took the bag, but not right away. First I sat down on the steps below the columns, I propped the backpack against me, then he lit a cigarette and also sat down, gave a cigarette to me, too, even though I didn't smoke, I really started coughing, not just for show, and during that

time he put away his cigarettes, and only after that did he take the bag that was lying beside him. But he didn't leave at once; first he calmly set it on his knees, smoked a little more, then stood up and tossed it onto his shoulder. Then I decided to say something, I don't know what, we exchanged some words, I don't remember what we said, but that's how I realized he wasn't Italian. He wasn't Italian, but he wasn't Bulgarian, either, by that time I already knew how Bulgarians spoke, my mentor, his accent was familiar to me, and I had also started to distinguish something in their faces. This one was completely different in color. Later, when I met with my mentor again, I asked him: what nationality was that man you sent, because I wasn't sure. My boss told me not to think about it. But what was he? I don't know why, I kept questioning him for some reason. My boss didn't divulge anything other than to say: anyone who can get narcotics into Italy without being caught can get anything out of Italy. He smiled in that way he had, and I realized that the service was satisfied, that it seemed to them that the job had a clean finish. He was just a courier, he didn't even look to see what was in the bag. For him, this was just a package, as my boss explained to me. And if you ask me, I'm sure that your volume got to Istanbul by boat. It departed on the very day I handed it over, it quietly sailed to Byzantium, and from there it's obvious, my mentor had enough channels. It was delivered along the trafficking route to where it was supposed to be.

But let's get back to the man who took the bag. The trafficker they'd hired to transport the book back – as they said, for its repatriation. Enough time had passed for me to forget this man. And why remember him, anyway – there was no reason. And so, after four years, in the spring, all around the world they started showing the shots fired at the Pope, the attack in St. Peter's Square. More or less the same place where I'd met that courier. And then there were enough photos in the papers of the man arrested. What can I say, we'd only seen each other two times, but it wasn't hard to recognize his face, gaunt and high-cheekboned. His name was Ali Ağca, a Turk. He had tried to kill Pope John Paul.





## ZAREV, Vladimir

Vladimir Zarev was born in 1947 in Sofia. He graduated in Bulgarian Philology from Sofia University. Since 1988, he has been the editor-in-chief of the literary magazine *Contemporary*. He is the author of eighteen books. His significant works include the family saga *Genesis*, *The Exit*, and *The Choice*. The TV show *The Tree of Life* is based on motives from *Genesis*. His novel *Ruin* has become widely popular, and it has been turned into the movie *Time Is Ours*.

Vladimir Zarev is the recipient of the Ivan Vazov and Elin Pelin National Literary Awards. He was also given the St. Paisii Hilendarski State Award and the Stoyan Mihaylovsky Honorary Sign.



### THE MONSTER

#### SYNOPSIS

*The Monster* is a book about artistic creativity and love – an impossible, eternal love that is not dependent on time, power, loneliness, old age and death. The novel tells the story of a famous writer on the cusp of old age, who devotes his time to his grandson and refuses to give interviews.

After insisting urging from both of his daughters, he agrees to meet a young journalist who would like to write a book about his life and work. Thus Nia appears in the writer's life –

she is intriguing without being a great beauty, she is provoking, questioning, and rejuvenating.

While describing his memories of the life of the Bulgarian intellectual elite under socialism, the writer falls in love with the young woman, who, contrary to all expectations, returns his feelings.

*The Monster* is a strongly emotional and wise novel. About a beautiful and impossible love, about time and its unmerciful stamp, about the looming shadow of the Monster, beyond which lurks Oblivion. The book is striking in its full-blooded imagery and precise attention to detail. The eternal themes of love and betrayal are masterfully interpreted, while the great clash between the spiritual and the material stands at the foundation of the novel.

Novel, 304 pages

ISBN: 9789542619161

Hermes Publishing House, 2019

### EXCERPT

*translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel*

18.

My laptop is old like me and every bit as blocked up feeble. It is slow, cranky and vengeful, nursing a hidden malice towards me, because I never learned to serve it, my friend Kamen, who is a whiz when it comes to telecommunications, claims that with my bullheaded mulishness, with my reluctance to operate it, I actually have not given it a chance to serve me. Its great advantage, and it doesn't try to hide this, is that it remembers what is most important, while at this advanced, respect-inspiring age, I ever more often remember what is accidental and often meaningless. My computer is overburdened and exhausted, because besides my novel and countless interviews, it also has given shelter to hundreds of photos of my grandchildren, taken at the most varied of ages and at the most exotic of locations around the world, so many photos that I never have time for them, and I feel that slippery, treacherous sensation that if I peer at them I will drown in that boundless happiness or at least contentment that children and their parents radiate before they get divorced. At my venerable old age, such smiling happiness is intolerable, because it has taught me to be a skeptic and to be distrustful towards everything that radiates exaggerated contentment.

I personally have one picture of myself as a baby, they had taken me out to the neighborhood park, I am peeking out of the dilapidated wooden stroller with a faded duck on it, they've stuck a ridiculous hat on my head, probably my mother's winter cap, it protects me from the evil eye and the cold. As a child I've forgotten myself in several more black-and-white photos that suggest compassion, as well as boredom, during my army service I was photographed three times – with a shaved head and a machine gun, kissing the flag when I took my oath; the second is as a senior cadet on the border, I am running after our service dog Rabies with a mean look on my face; and in the third I'm dressed in civilian clothes with a revolver tucked in my waist band and sitting atop Orlik, the army horse I had been assigned. That horse had the pleasure of being ridden by me for a whole year, even though he was a gelded stallion, he was a devil and to the delight of the border soldiers he tossed me into thorn thickets at least five times. Then I have a dozen or so, likewise faded by now color photographs with famous writers who were classics in their own time, and with ever more cheerful yet insignificant colleagues. The largest number of photos were left from my wedding to my first wife, but she took them, thank goodness, and carried off with her that long-since-lived-out celebration once and for all.

So what am I trying to say... I don't even remember anymore, but I had hoped to share something important and breathtaking. Most likely the idea that every photo mummifies us, as if like taxidermized butterflies we are pinned to the moment and this prevents us from truly remembering, since a clear, life-changing memory does not need specifics and immobility, but rather imagination, elaboration and real ecstasy. Or perhaps I wanted to develop my thought that the older a person gets, he seems to have more time, and for precisely this reason he ruthlessly never has enough time, especially to submerge himself into hundreds and hundreds of photos of his always neatly dressed, goofily smiling and happy grandchildren.

Martyr-like, my laptop connects me to the Internet, to the all-penetrating, all-knowing Google and given my complete ineptitude, I get lost, I disappear into the infinite and – I am convinced – mind-numbing sea of information. While I drink my morning coffee, I stoically bear my own clumsiness, but then my irritation turns to impatience, impatience into self-pity, and self-pity into hatred, into loathing for this poor computer and its worn and faded keyboard.

I finally come across two photos of her, one stern, thoughtful, withdrawn, in the other dissolute, in her bikini setting by the edge of the sea. Beneath them I find out with amazement that her name is Nia Petrova Domosedova, a name that vaguely rings a bell. I find out that she was born in 1993 in Sofia, that she graduated from the English high school and then studied journalism at Sofia University – Kliment

Ohridski. She was an intern at Nova Television, but was let go and since then has been contributing to several of the most popular newspapers, most of all one of the most-visited websites Club X. It appears that professionally she is mainly interested in politics, but the curious fact is that she also has written a lot about architecture as well. Back in her Nova TV days, she had made a short and rather superficial video clip about Gaudi's cathedral in Barcelona. This struck me as important and I decided to remember it, but I forgot it a moment later while I was reading an interview of hers with Prime Minister Boyko Borisov. It was provocative, in fact openly brave, the questions kept coming back to corruption, she absolutely impartially claimed that in Bulgaria 60-70% of public procurement funds are stolen, while the prime minister replied with his typical, salt-of-the-earth sense of humor, but he was clearly nonplussed.

I start to think things over and with astonishment realize that the more I think the more I fall into thinking things over. This is a favorite joke of mine, which I use to escape from my own uncertainty, but at this moment the morning is coming triumphantly through the window, it fully describes my state of lethargy and the doubt seeping into my mind. I suddenly recall that the daughter of a childhood friend of mine works in the newsroom at Nova Television, I find her number in my address book and give her a call by mobile phone. Polya picks up almost immediately, as if she had been expecting me.

"How can I help you?" She asks cheerfully.

"I feel very uncomfortable asking you this, but..." I pause for a long moment as if I really cannot remember something important.

"But what, Uncle Simeon?"

"A girl, a naughty young journalist, has decided to write a book about me."

"That's wonderful."

"She worked there, at Nova Television, she left or you helped her leave."

"What is her name?" Polya asks in a business-like tone, hinting that she is busy and that her time is precious.

"Nia Domosedova, Nia Petrova Domosedova."

"There was a ditz here, a real Barbie with short skirts and long legs, but she wasn't in news. Give me ten minutes, I'll check into it and call you back."

While I watch through the window a fluffy squirrel having fun on the tree outside, playing on the branching and around the trunk of the enormous chestnut, as if hiding from itself, my phone sings "Ode to Joy," Polya is calling.

"Five months ago this Nia Domosedova, Nia Petrova Domosedova," she begins acidly, "was asked to resign."

“You fired her because she did not agree with the TV’s political position?”

“No, Uncle Simeon, because she was stubborn and lacked restraint.”

“Because she stood up for herself and refused to constantly acquiesce, to cover events and news stories ‘correctly’?”

“She was always getting into arguments and was sometimes rude. I’m sorry.”

“Thank you, dear, I hope I haven’t caused you any trouble.”

“But that doesn’t mean she can’t write a good, smart book about you,” Polya finishes with this conciliatory phrase and hangs up the phone.

19.

He is waiting for her with impatience, with increasing anxiousness, with growing curiosity, but also with obedience. “With obedience” – it sounds disrespectful to the man himself, downright cruel, but it appears to be true. He has put on loose white linen trousers and a blindingly white linen shirt, his exhaustion is packaged in white and likely this makes his age all the more obvious. “Old age, re-embodied as nobility” – he thinks to himself. The linen gets wrinkled instantaneously, his face is wrinkled from the years, but the wrinkles suit him, they give him an air of manliness mixed with an emanation of holiness. He looks like a saint, to some extent he perhaps is a saint precisely because rapidly approaching old age prevents him from being himself, from being the good-natured evil-doer, the splendid and idolized monster. A profligate and likeable monster, who loves pleasures, women, actually all people, but who is primarily enamored with himself.

He has nothing else to do so he inspects the photo of Nia in her bathing suit carefully, like a doctor. She looks stunningly slender, sex appeal streams from her like a scent, but her face is pensive and it holds her back, turns her into something more than a reclining girl, it transforms her into a metaphor, into something that separates the coast from the sea, the mediocre multitudes on the beach from the majestic emptiness of the infinite. The photo chattily tells of her ostensible dishabille, but her eyes are not visible, those unbelievable dark bluish-green, penetrating, sometimes exultantly grey eyes, into which one falls as if into an abyss. Eyes as memorable as a bleeding knife wound, and surely every bit as harsh in their tenderness.

“Even if she was with someone,” Simeon thinks languidly, “she is alone! As she brings together the shore with the sea, she does not seem to have been abandoned or jilted, rather that she was alone from the very beginning.”

There is a delicate, polite buzz at the doorbell, but at that moment he senses confusion overwhelming him and transforming into fear. Into stalking, insurmountable fear. He waits a full minute to pull himself out of his trance and to

get used to his dread, then he goes over to the door and opens it. He sinks into her aroma of patchouli, but most of all into her eyes, which look at him impudently and which are clearly mocking him. In a second she has noticed that foolish and already wrinkled whiteness and his fumbling vanity. Nia takes his stupid yearning to pay attention to her and win her approval as a victory. She realizes that she is turning him upside-down, changing him, perhaps even subduing him, and that gives her satisfaction, inexplicable delight. Her face lights up with gloating, then Nia realizes that she might offend him, run afoul of the coagulated remnants of his manly pride and repulse him.

“I brought you a snack,” she says sweetly, “banitsa with spinach and cheese.”

“And I made coffee, but you’re late so it must be cold by now.”

“I’m late because the mother of a friend of mine is getting divorced and they both asked me to testify on her behalf in court, but I don’t want to.” She licks her lips innocently. “I like her father, physically and in every other way. I like older men, plus he’s good-looking and is a great bridge-player.”

“I believe that I, too, am a decent bridge-player,” he naively agrees.

“You’re being modest, I’ve heard that you are amazing at bridge.”

Nia goes past him in the hallway and envelops him in the scent of young, strong flesh.

“I love, I simply adore bridge,” she says, going into the living room and it becomes a different room, the light changes, it filled with uneven and dramatic chiaroscuro, the somnolent antiques and the paintings on the wall wake up fitfully and seem to begin speaking. “But I hate chess. My grandfather was an excellent chess player, but I don’t believe in that game.”

“Chess is one of the few games in which the opponents start out on an even playing field. Always even, any advantages come from their own skill.”

“That’s exactly the reason I don’t find it very delicious. There is not equality in real life, Mr. Stanimirov, everyone starts from a different point, tries to shove aside and harm the others or at least to make them obsessed with him.”

Nia is lit up by the window and while she obligingly pours coffee into the cups, he has the time and permission to look her over. All of her. In the same deep and studious way, like his examination of the photo on the beach, to inspect her like an airy and beautiful butterfly affixed to a pin in a display. The duality that the girl radiates today comes from her clothes, she is wearing a modern high-necked blouse, black with red lips on it, and black extremely short shorts that lewdly accentuate her exquisite long legs, in fact, her innocence. She is wearing high heels that are also shamelessly red. With relief Simeon senses how his fear that Nia would not come, as well as the paralyzing fear that she had come, is passing away, allowing him the

possibility of slipping back into his old man's nonchalance, into his manly experience.

The girl puts the banitsa on plates, while he breaks up a bar of chocolate. Nia is so sure of her superiority that she smiles absentmindedly. She has crossed her legs and thus locked herself up, closed herself off to the light pouring from the window and to his gaze.

"It's so strange that she is here," Simeon thinks excitedly, "actually, the girl is right, there is no equality in life, only the struggle for dominance and resistance!"

"My father was an architect," he begins, feeling out the terrain, "I, too, love that art, the way the imagination transforms the dead, the coarsely materialistic, the practice into the spiritual and the eternal."

Nia listens, but the smile remains on her lips.

"For example, today once again on the Internet I was looking at Gaudi's majestic cathedral in Barcelona, the building's very eyes and ears seemed trained on God. It is so different and stunning, so inaccessibly unusual that it seems to have truly touched God."

The girl's face suddenly freezes and goes dark, she feels surprised, as if driven into an unexpected trap and for precisely this reason she feels frightened and wounded. She pretends to take a sip from the coffee and burns her tongue.

"Gaudi is a genius, in Barcelona there are two more strange houses of his that attract tourists from around the world."

"I don't know who Gaudi is," she replies, somehow exaggeratedly quiet in her chagrin, "and I've only ever heard of that cathedral in Barcelona."

Simeon readies his next slap in the face, he had decided to tell her something befuddling and striking about Polya and Nova Television, when, having regained her calm and to some extent her arrogance, with a practiced movement she leans back and "opens" her crossed legs. They open slightly and high up, on the inside of her left thigh, where the skin is soft and cool as silk, he catches sight of that impossible, depraved and murderous bit of straw, that same straw that had left him breathless in the dying light of the Bistritsa Monastery. Powerful, crushing and full of betrayal, the fear grips him again, for a moment his lower jaw hangs open helplessly.

"What will we talk about today?" Nia asks with relish. "What will you tell me about today?"

"Even if she's been with someone, even if some idiot walked her to my door," Simeon pondered the painful thought, "She was alone! She deliberately stuck that bit of straw there, that bit of straw ties her to me and separates her from me, good God, she is alone even now!"

20.

During the night he has an agonizing and absurd dream. In the tumbledown church of the Bistritsa Monastery the light is diluted, as if it has passed through deep water, the place smells of burned candles and incense, of fading whispered sorrow and holiness. In the corner, beneath the icon of St. George and the dragon, Joanna, young, innocent and fragrant, just as she had been all those years ago, and Nia are sitting. The two of them do not know each other, most likely in the cold twilight they can't even see each other, they are dressed in thin T-shirts and short skirts that barely cover their sunburned thighs. Beneath the altar, near the three-pronged candlestick, the abbess is standing, extremely aged and wrinkled, white-haired, toothless, she smiles and in her hand she has raised a bit of straw like a cross. A tiny suspiciously ordinary bit of straw.

He woke up drenched in sweat and could not fall back to sleep. He stayed like that, listening to the silence in that apartment until day dawned in the bedroom window. Nia had managed to surprise him, she had done it deliberately, either to humiliate him or to give him a chance. To gloat over his manly impotence or to provoke it. The more I think, the more I think things over. He shuffled over to the first-aid kit in the kitchen, drank thirty drops of valerian mixed with water and instead of finding relief or at least temporary calm, he smelled of old age.

Dimova, Teodora  
THE STRICKEN

Nikolov, Momchil  
CHEKMO

Duleva, Demetra  
THE WANDERING  
ALBATROSS

Radeva, Yanitsa  
GREETINGS FROM HADES

Enev, Deyan  
LALA BAREFOOT

Stankov, Ivan  
NAMES BENEATH THE  
SNOW

Gospodinov, Georgi  
TIME SHELTER

Tenev, Georgi  
BALKAN RITUAL

Kroneva, Lyubov  
WICKEDY-WITCHY

Zarev, Vladimir  
THE MONSTER

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1 Bulgaria Sq., Sofia 1463, Bulgaria

+359 2 916 68 30 | [office@ndk.bg](mailto:office@ndk.bg) | <http://ndk.bg>

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