Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2025

NATIONAL PALACE OF CULTURE
CONGRESS CENTRE SOFIA

NATIONAL BOOK CENTRE

ТОЗИ ПРОЕКТ Е РЕАЛИЗИРАН
С ФИНАНСОВАТА ПОДКРЕПА
НА МИНИСТЕРСТВОТО НА КУЛТУРАТА

Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2025

Bulgarian-Language Prose © Plamen Antov, Antonia Apostolova, Radoslav Bimbalov, Krasimir Dimovski, Georgi Gospodinov, Tea Moneva, Aziz Tash, Chavdar Tsenov, Boyan Yordanov, Vladimir Zarev, 2022-2025.

English-Language Translation © Angela Rodel, Desislava Toncheva, Traci Speed, Yana Ellis, Christopher Buxton, Gergana Galabova, Izidora Angel, 2025

Editing, Proofreading © Angela Rodel, 2025.

Design, Prepress © Damyan Damyanov, 2025.

All Contents Copyright © National Palace of Culture – Congress Centre Sofia, 2025.

Editorial Board, Compilers: Svetlozar Zhelev, Director of the National Book Centre at the National Palace of Culture – Congress Centre Sofia, along with Prof. Ameliya Licheva, PhD, Assoc. Prof. Dariya Karapetkova, PhD, Assoc. Prof. Darin Tenev, PhD, Prof. Milena Kirova, PhD, and Mitko Novkov, PhD, members of the Expert Council of the National Book Centre at the National Palace of Culture – Congress Centre Sofia.

Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2025

NATIONAL
PALACE OF CULTURE
CONGRESS CENTRE
SOFIA

NATIONAL
BOOK CENTRE

CONTENTS

NATIONAL PALACE OF CULTURE / *7*

NATIONAL BOOK CENTRE / *8*

Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2025 / *9*

Plamen Antov / *11*
BACKWARDS UP THE RIVER

Antonia Apostolova / *21*
THE PAIN COMES LATER

Radoslav Bimbalov / *32*
YOU, MY LIKENESS

Krasimir Dimovski / *42*
THESEUS AND HIS LABYRINTH

Georgi Gospodinov / *55*
DEATH AND THE GARDENER

Tea Moneva / *65*
MANDARINS ON MARIENPLATZ

Aziz Tash / *77*
THE LOW FLIGHT ABOVE WORDS

Chavdar Tsenov / *88*
A MURDER ON STAMBOLIYSKI BOULEVARD

Boyan Yordanov / *100*
UNDER THE MOON, HUGE AS A PUMPKIN

Vladimir Zarev / *111*
I, TOO, DESCENDED

Translators /

NATIONAL PALACE OF CULTURE

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

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

NATIONAL BOOK CENTRE

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

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

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

The National Book Centre at the National Palace of Culture works in close cooperation with the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Bulgaria, and the Bulgarian Book Association, 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.

Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2025

Plamen ANTOV

Backwards up the River

Plamen Antov (1964) is a poet, fiction writer, and professor at the Institute of Literature – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. He is also a traveler. His other books of short stories include *The Rabbit's Escape* (1996, Free Poetry Society), *Boundaries of Delay* (2013, Janet 45), and *Big Red Sun, Lonely Electric Lights* (2019, Ergo). His latest poetry books are *The Totem of the Wolf: The Non-Political* (2013) and *The Poet Is a Chthonic Being* (2015).

He is the author of theoretical studies on Bulgarian postmodernism (2010, 2016), *Yavorov and Botev* (2009), *Emilian Stanev and Martin Heidegger* (2019–2021), *To Chicago and Back and Bay Ganyo* (2021), *Love and Fatherland. Studies on Bulgarian Renaissance Literature and Culture* (2024), as well as the book *The Fragment, Fragmentarily* (2022).

About the book

Backwards up the River ostensibly refers to itself as "nine stories"; yet it does so as if to obscure the unified "inner space" constructed through the numerous visible and invisible threads connecting the individual stories—to such an extent that some critics prefer to refer to it as a novel. It contains a symphonic structure in which certain motifs are periodically renewed in different contexts and semantic perspectives. The author himself makes no secret that one of his goals with this work was to challenge standard discursive purity. The book deliberately oscillates (plays) on the edge between fact and fiction. Two parallel books, intertwined, unfold before the reader. One contains travelogues about the author-traveler's real journeys through various "peripheral" corners of the world: wandering through jungles and deserts where dangers familiar from the traditional adventure genre lurk. (It is no coincidence that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a general intertext at various levels within the book—both in terms of plot and ideas.) Alongside this, there is a fictionalization: the book has a strong literary self-awareness, imbued as it is with autofiction.

Yet the real point of the book only begins there. The genres of travel writing and storytelling (travel narrative and/or fictionalized travel writing) are complemented by essayistic-philosophical discourse, at times journalistic in nature or even approaching the style of Socratic dialogue. Current issues in the modern world, where ecology and ethics are inextricably intertwined, are discussed: the understanding/misunderstanding of "the other" (in the figure of "the savage"), the lost (natural) authenticity of modern/postmodern man, living in the bubble of his own linguistic simulacrum. The book gradually unfolds a deep, radical critique of the contemporary world, which has lost its authenticity. The aim is not to arrive at unambiguous, definitive answers, but rather to engage in discussion, to try out different versions of the existing world, none of which is more "correct" or "true" than the others. The reader is actively involved in the discussion.

A subtle, barely noticeable but important religious thread runs through the entire book. It is set by the first story, which stands apart from the rest: like a tuning fork, it sets the high moral tone of the book, which discreetly resonates throughout, only to be "closed" in the last story.

Backwards up the River

EXCERPT *Translated by Gergana Galabova*

Organising an expedition, even to one of the last remaining corners of this rapidly shrinking planet that has been untouched or only slightly touched by civilization, is a thankless and tedious task, the bulk of which consists of battling the omnipresent bureaucracy, a hallmark of our civilization, but even more egregious, not least because of its simple-minded self-interest, in those parts of the world that are still lightly touched.

An even more thankless task would be to describe this battle, so I will spare you that and start with the essence—that morning when the two motorized pirogues set off against the current of the Carrao River just above the Ucaima, Guaraima, and Hacha waterfalls. Somewhere out there, ahead of us, in the depths of the jungle, was our destination—Auyan Tepui, a vast rocky plateau with impassable sheer walls.

*I have always thought that this was the perfect story, the perfect journey—upstream, back, further and further back, deeper and deeper into the jungle, in search of the source.

*

I was aware, of course, I was aware that it was futile to hope to meet "the other" on these journeys, this fetish of our own painfully egocentric civilization, riddled with complexes. In the end, the only thing we can hope for is, once again, an encounter with ourselves, with our own ego, albeit in the form of our prehistoric past, with our own pure essence; "the other" is just an alibi, a random intermediary, a crooked mirror.

*

A few days earlier, we had flown from Ciudad Bolívar in an old Cessna plane whose engine wheezed intermittently and choked like an asthmatic facing its final breath. We were carrying only small backpacks with us; our main luggage was already waiting for us in Canaima. The bare fields below us (*campo limpo*, the pilot pointed out) gradually gave way to brush that grew denser and denser (*campo sujo*) until it turned into a thick jungle, intercepted by the glistening serpentines of rivers, and sometimes giving way to vast swamps or marshes with

delightful, unbelievable colours, blending ochre, cobalt, yellow, and emerald green; then in the distance appeared the pale silhouette of the first tepui, and finally, shortly before we landed, the large lagoon with a crown of waterfalls—the place from where we would continue by pirogue.

Each of the pirogues had a powerful Yamaha outboard motor at the rear, and their bows were clumsily painted with faces: mouths, eyes. They—these pirogues—were living creatures.

*

I didn't know whether to observe the things around me, the bow parting the water, the birds, the receding landscape at different speeds—the closer view of the shore, the slender silhouettes of the palm trees, and the more distant one on the tepuis—or to take pictures with my camera. This choice between the unique, singular, fleeting moment and the lasting, repeating, indestructible gaze, stored forever by the machine, the opportunity to return again and again, to see each image multiple times, to remember it forever as it is at that very moment, while you are passing it by, to remember it as it is now, even though it itself will no longer be the same. I wanted to remember everything, every detail that I might need later (in the present, as I recall and write, walking back along my own faded footsteps). I knew well that technology makes us lazy and superficial, that our ability to record has forever deprived us of the ability to remember, which the Arekuna still possessed in blissful ignorance; that the camera takes away our ability to see the world through which we pass as strangers.

*

Creating a story is filling a gap. A gap that no one before you has noticed. Only you can do it.

*

Fernando, who sat opposite me in the long pirogue and smiled at me in his usual way when he noticed me looking at him, was a real Arekuna, still a genuine Arekuna, even though he was dressed in old cut-off jean shorts and a faded T-shirt, just like me—still a real Arekuna; I would gradually come to understand this through our fragmentary conversations in invariably poor English during the three weeks of sailing that lay ahead of us. I would gradually realize that this man, dressed just like me, was completely naked under his clothes. That he had a very ancient, simple soul that was incomprehensible to me, despite the dozens of books on the ethnology of the local tribes that I had read in preparation for this expedition—I would understand this one evening in the heart of the jungle, hundreds of miles from the nearest village of white people, and suddenly I would

be frightened—not by the jaguar people, the *imaikoik*, about whom he spoke in his elementary English in the dim light of the fire, but by him, by the fact that they were an undeniable reality for him; I realized that he was on the other side of the world, he was inside the story I had read, I was reading—he was part of it. The jaguar people, as far as I can understand, belong to a tribe that is extremely primitive—even by their standards—wandering through the jungle, taming jaguars. They hid from everyone, but when white people appeared in their lands, they secretly circled their camps and watched them, attracted by their scent, which they could smell from afar. All the other tribes are afraid of the imaikoik people, Fernando whispers, casting a fearful glance at the darkness, whose thick wall surrounds us beyond the uncertain flickering refuge of the fire. At that moment, I suddenly saw him without his jeans and T-shirt, I saw him naked, wearing only a simple loincloth made of raffia or animal skin around his groin, leather bracelets on his ankles, a bird feather stuck in the cartilage between his nostrils, and I was suddenly frightened... But that would happen a few days later.

*

Fernando was our guide, a man to whom we owed much: he had hired the four porters—silent, incomprehensible creatures; he was the link between them and us, between our world and theirs, this one.

*

We were going to sail up the Carrao River for a few days, then turn into one of its tributaries, the Churun. We were going to follow it as far as we could, as far as the two motorized pirogues could squeeze through the rapids, dotted with protruding rocks, as we well knew. And then we would continue on foot through the jungle, parallel to the river, towards its source, or towards that improbable stream of water cascading from the edge of Auyan Tepui, which a lone pilot, flying over the endless green ocean, had noticed with disbelieving eyes, glistening like a silver blade, like a giant feather from the sacred bird *quetzal*. Little was known of this river source, other than than this stream of water plunging from the edge of the plateau, because on the plateau itself, above the waterfall, the pilot did not notice any river, no traces of a river, nor was any spotted afterwards, when a special expedition was organized with a small twin-engine plane. The expedition turned out to be a complete failure, the plane circled for a long time in search of a place to land, the entire surface of the vast plateau, as far as the eye could see through the thick fog that seemed to always envelop the plateau, was covered with dense jungle, and the terrain beneath it was uneven sandstone rock, cut by deep crevices. The only flat spot they finally found turned out to be a marsh.

The long-rusty remains of the plane, half-engulfed by it, are said to still lie there today, but the three explorers, just like in classic adventure stories, were never heard from again. In this respect, we could hardly have done more; we were more intrigued by some legends that circulated among the tribes inhabiting the vast spaces around the plateau. As I said, as I gloated, this vast land of impenetrable jungle, crisscrossed by a dense network of rivers, waterfalls (*saltos*), and foul-smelling, widely spreading igapos—malarious, periodically flooded areas, swamps that constantly change in size and shape; a land littered with sedimentary rocks, jutting lonely above the jungle, with the sheer walls of dozens or hundreds of plateaus (no one had ever managed to count them), forever shrouded in mist that only occasionally broke—this vast, sparsely populated territory (in fact, no one knew what human beings lurked beneath the impenetrable mantle of the jungle, which the white man could only glimpse from above and in fragments, flying over separate parts of it)—this land of tertiary forests, waters, and rocks was one of the last corners of the planet, I thought smugly, one of the last places where ubiquitous civilization continued to suffer defeat.

*

(from the notebook) Today, in the era of globalization, we must content ourselves with the last remnants of certain cultures—more archaeologists than witnesses, and almost none of us residing in any of them.

*

Only the first to arrive is a traveler, an author, I wrote in my pocket notebook amid splashes thrown up by the bow scraping the water—the only one who has the privilege of walking among nature, just as a woman can only be deflowered once; the second is now only a poor imitator, a plagiarist.

Although here the Carrao river was still wide and the main current was barely noticeable, we kept to the shore, densely overgrown with heliconias, to make it easier for the motors. Further on, in the narrow and fast-flowing Churun, we would not have much choice; our only concern would be avoiding the numerous rapids and shoals.

Later we would learn that heliconia is one of the jungle's false faces: with its thick, fleshy leaves, it gave the impression of being impenetrable, but a single swing of the machete was enough to bring down whole bunches of it at your feet, showering you with flowers.

*

At first when we got out of the boats, we had to walk through the llanos (*grama*) covered with low grass along the river because of the rapids; they gradually became overgrown with brush, only the fine pink sand under the sparse grass remained the same. The pale blue, misty silhouettes of the tepuis stood out far ahead of us, somewhere out there was our destination. We had passed through a strange village here, still on the border of civilization, but of the scale of these territories, the border itself was a slow, several-hundred-mile-long transition. There was large village on the crest of a low hill by the river with a wide view of the unbelievable outlines of the tepuis, the houses—the elongated male *kansa* and the female round *churuata*—were unusually new and beautiful, but completely deserted, except for the very last ones we passed, where a few men and women were bustling about, the women preparing food around a fire and most of the men lounging in the shade, with only one crouching and carving something. Fernando exchanged a few words with them and later explained that a few years ago, white people had come and built this village as a set for an adventure film, and when they left, locals had settled into some of the houses.

*

"I don't want to take pictures, I don't want to be part of the desecration, of the plundering."

"But the memory you will take with you is also like looting."

"That's right, you're right. We ourselves are part of *technology*, part of the demon of destruction. We cannot pass through this world without destroying it. We cannot slither like a snake through the grass."

"We cannot slither."

*

Here, as we crossed the fields on the right bank of the Carrao, before entering the jungle itself, we walked on the softest sand imaginable; warm and soft as sifted flour. Leah and I took off our shoes to feel, to absorb the pleasure, as if it were some kind of deep, erotic fusion—not between us, but with something bigger than us, big, soft, and warm like a womb; to absorb the pleasure down to its last particle, to the finest grain, speck, shadow, breath. Later, I would read that this sand, which caressed our feet and made us feel like babies again, as Leah said, is among the oldest geological formations on the planet, along with this entire vast area enclosed between the Orinoco River to the north, the Amazon to the south, the Caroni to the west, and the Essequibo to the east. At the heart of this area was Mount Roraima, which we were slowly entering.

The very sight around us, not just the hidden geology beneath our feet, was

ancient, incomparable to anything familiar to the eye and mind, as if we had found ourselves in some Devonian or Cambrian era. I would read that this was indeed the case, that this land of sandstone plateaus was the only remaining part of the supercontinent Gondwana, which connected South America and Africa during the Mesozoic era.

*

Geographical reference books—in the easy manner of "white" science, itself a child of modern colonialism—name the waterfall after the aviator who first spotted it. First? As if the Arekuna, Kamarakota, and Ingariko people had not lived there for centuries or millennia; but they, of course, are not taken into account, or more precisely, they are not part of the discourse, they are not that meta-consciousness worthy of naming; they are an organic part of the subject itself; the view, not the gaze.

I ask Fernando for the local name of the waterfall. Kerepakupaimeru, he says, I ask him to repeat it slowly, articulating the sounds clearly so I can write it down: Kerepakupaimeru.

*

Besides Fernando, we were accompanied by four arekuna porters, whom he had hired for us. They steered the boats.

Following the old, well-tested principle, we had divided our supplies in two, with each boat carrying everything we needed: food, essential items, gasoline cans piled up on the bow and tightly covered with a rubberized canvas—in case one of the boats capsized in the numerous rapids (*kashoeiras*) we had to overcome—some of them quite dangerous—and we lost some of our gear, we would still have everything we needed, albeit in reduced quantities. Although the provisions were divided into relatively small portions and packed in waterproof bags, in the event of an accident, some of the bags would undoubtedly be carried away by the current. Most of the luggage was in the first boat, steered by two arekuna; one sat with his legs dangling at the bow and a sturdy pole in his hand, constantly checking the depth and pushing the boat away from dangerous rocks, while the other steered the rudder, ready at any moment to pull out the outboard motor with lightning speed. Both were on the alert the whole time; the one sitting at the bow constantly shouted short, sharp commands to the other without turning his head, and gave him various hand signals, warning him about the condition of the bottom and the maneuvers he had to make. The other two steered in a similar manner the second pirogue, where Leah and I were sitting at the expense of some

of our supplies; Fernando moved between our boat and the first one, helping the natives or scooping out the water that constantly accumulated at the bottom.

*

When we met there, at Canaima, I paid no attention to them: the usual dark, seemingly introverted faces, the usual ragged trousers and faded, perpetually unbuttoned shirts hanging over them. They were part of the equipment, I only interacted with Fernando. Gradually, I began to discover details that both frightened and fascinated me inexplicably: the bracelets made of grass and dried fruits from some local plant under the sleeves of their shirts, the necklaces with caiman teeth and the talismans made of jaguar bone, parrot feather decorations tucked into the bracelets above the biceps, almost under the armpits. But I was really scared when one morning I saw them with their faces painted red and white. When I shared this with Leah, she laughed: "Maybe they're just doing it for us, maybe it's just the usual theater for white people, for tourists with cameras around their necks?" A clever, self-serving game of authenticity—don't underestimate the cunning savages, they quickly understand what is expected of them. From an ethnological point of view, I said, the game of authenticity is just as authentic as authenticity itself.

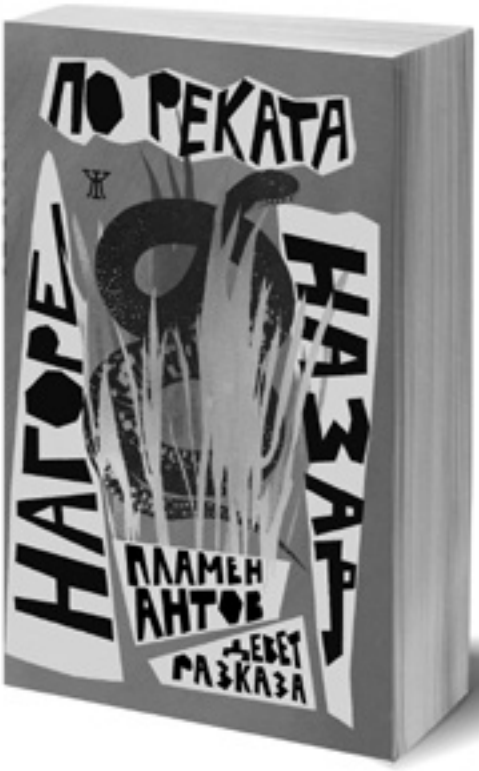
*

As we slowly approached Auyan Tepui I noticed that every time the rocky silhouette suddenly loomed up ahead of us, they would cover their eyes with their hands so as not to look, or focus their gaze intently on the water. The steep rocky edges of the plateau, rising tens or even hundreds of meters above the jungle, are almost always shrouded in clouds due to evaporation. When I asked Fernando about their strange behaviour, he reluctantly, misusing his limited knowledge of English, muttered that evil spirits called *maguariton* lived up there and that it was dangerous for humans to look up. He also said that in their language, Auyan Tepui means exactly that—Devil's Mountain, home of the sinister *maguariton*...

*

All that remains for us is to tremble with self-loathing, I write in my notebook, or to pretend that we do not notice it—the universal infection. That the world is still the same as it was in the days of the first travelers, the explorers—those who brought the infection: the first travelers are always the last, all those who come after them are just tourists, mourning what has been lost. The difference is fundamental: the traveler destroys a reality that the tourist, filled with nostalgia, struggles to restore in an illusory way, trapped in a bubble of delusion and self-deception. But in both cases, the object of these passions is illusory—more a

projection than an autonomous reality, insofar as no reality is autonomous in itself. It is pragmatic, and therein lies its cunning, which always helps it, like oil in a vessel of water, to remain on the surface, outsmarting all external forces, external discourses—those that destroy it and those that mourn what has been destroyed. The essence of this soft and therefore indestructible pragmatism consists in the absence of its own form, in the elasticity of its own matter and its own boundaries, in the ability to absorb all external influences and external bodies—their assimilation, their easy incorporation into its own essence. The formlessness of form, the easy sacrifice of the superficial, helps to preserve the hidden innermost essence, the structure. Authenticity is neither preserved nor disappears, it constantly changes, harmonizing with that which destroys it, absorbing it, assimilating it. Primitive consciousness is playful, primitive culture is playful, I said, watching how one arekuna handled the Yamaha outboard motor with the same dexterity with which his companion operated the rod. The magic of the Machine was more radical, with the same power with which the magic of the evil spirits *maguariton*, inhabiting the cloud-covered peaks of the plateau, continued to reign.



Short story collection,
228 pages
ISBN: 9786191869336
Janet 45 Publishing House,
2024

Photo: Yana Lozeva

Antonia APOSTOLOVA

The Pain Comes Later

Antonia Apostolova is an award-winning writer and renowned literary critic and editor, whose voice has become indispensable to Bulgaria's literary scene. She published her first poetry collection, *Salty Apple*, at the age of 17 in 1994. *Sinking in the Dead Sea* (2019) marked her transition to prose years later—this collection of short stories won the Yordan Yovkov award in the debut category and was shortlisted for the Portal Kultura award. The book was followed by *We, Who Are Not Here* (2021)—a coming-of-age auto-fictional novel about the '90s generation that received the Portal Kultura and Burgas Prose awards and was shortlisted for the Peroto (Quill) National Award for contemporary Bulgarian fiction. The work was adapted into a short film of the same name and is currently under consideration for a full-length film adaptation. Antonia's latest book *The Pain Comes Later* (2025)—a multigenerational family saga that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries—has been well received by readers and hailed by critics as "a contemporary classic redefining the Bulgarian literary tradition that sits comfortably within a world-class context with its language, narrative approach and

its unprecedented bravery in the exploration of the psychological and the erotic." Besides editing, Apostolova contributes to major literary outlets, translates poetry and runs her own literary platform *Literaturnirazgovori.com*.

About the book

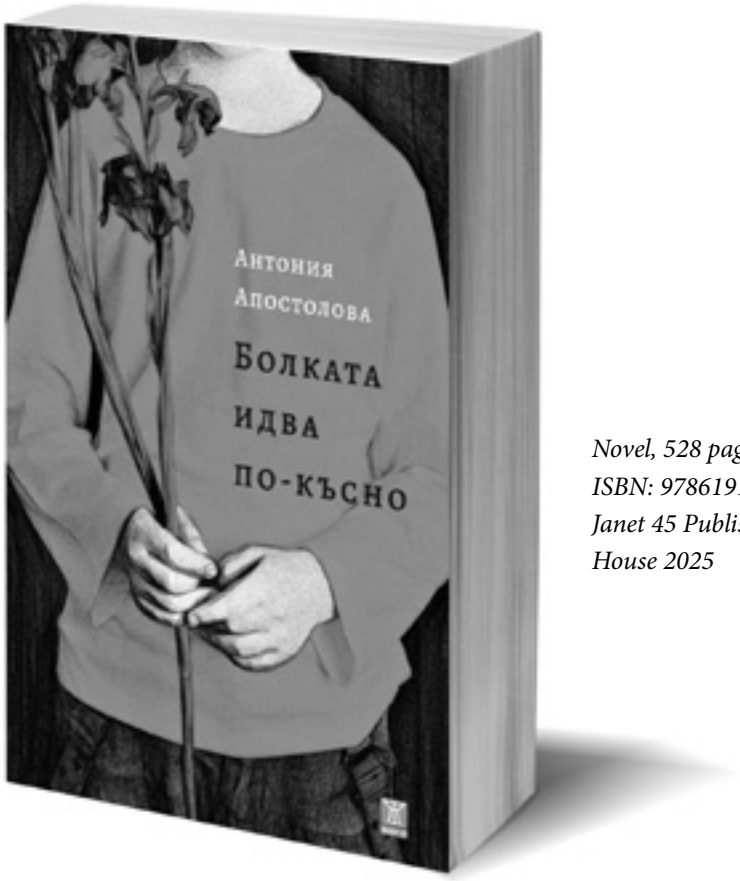
Crafted as a letter from a father to the young son with whom he had severed all ties, *The Pain Comes Later* (2025) is a saga spanning several generations that maps migration routes across Europe and the Middle East to craft a world both tangibly local and universally resonant. The recollections of Ilan, a middle-aged man, immune to pain and loss, soon unfold into a cunningly unreliable yet painfully self-baring confession. Erotically and philosophically mesmerizing, the narrative probes deeply into the dynamics of all the families and relationships that comprised his life, boldly refuting "truths" about sexuality, parenthood, blood ties and faith.

The narrative begins with Ilan and his wife (*the mother*), for whom he once had moved from Israel to Bulgaria, signing their divorce papers and making a vague promise to one day write their side of the story for their son, Yoav, to read when he grows up. Little does Ilan know that he will be fulfilling his promise only a few years later, after his new partner Laura suffers a stillbirth.

Writing the letter in the aftermath of this tragedy, Ilan will revisit his very first marriage in Israel to the eye surgeon and unfulfilled feminist Irit, who divorced him because they couldn't have children. He will recount meeting online Yoav's mother, a translator in Bulgaria, and the woman closest to his archetypal ideal of his aunt Helena. He and his father secretly shared a lifelong incestuous affection for Helena. His intellectual, sensual relationship with his wife will be gradually pervaded by her pathological insecurities and fears. The birth of Yoav—a gifted, yet challenging child—will push her to the edge. Most importantly, while writing the letter, Ilan will come to see through the alluring hollowness and superficial "edification" of his new relationship with life-coach Laura. A relationship that

sets in motion his ultimate fear: turning into his nemesis of a brother Omer and recreating the family of his childhood.

The Pain Comes Later explores the concept of a final blow—a pain capable of catching up with Ilan's analytical mind which has long learned to avoid it with well-crafted phrases. Is it too late to have feelings? Is it too late to rewrite the story of Abraham and Isaak and to utter those pivotal Biblical words: *I'm here, my son*?



Novel, 528 pages
ISBN: 9786191869503
Janet 45 Publishing House 2025

The Pain Comes Later

EXCERPT *Translated by Yana Ellis*

1.

If you are reading this letter, then you are old enough, and I have been waiting years for your mother to decide that you are ready for it. The hand I last held—small, square, with puffy pads—is now probably stained not with your favourite ink, but with dark hairs like mine. Its pale fingers have lengthened, and their spiky knuckles guard the lifeline squeezed in the palm. The pencils with which you once drew our distorted faces have probably become cigarettes poorly concealed from your mother. The straw-coloured curls from where your childhood nightmares quickly evaporated in the mornings have already darkened, smoothed out by nervous palms running over them. And that volatile moisture around your tiny penis, once just perspiration after a game or unintentional wetting, has long since thickened into the seed of male violence.

Would you say that I have no right to know about all these changes in you because I haven't witnessed them? I would have been absent for long time, many years by the time you read this. A period in which you wouldn't have shown any interest in playing music and might have insisted on throwing away my old electric piano, the only thing I didn't take when I left you. Its place would probably have been taken by something far more suitable to your growing up—a gaming computer, a strongbox for your savings, a bicycle or just an ordinary cupboard. And that's completely fair. For if I left our family with honourable finality, determined to be absent in every possible way, then I have been freed from the need to know everything about you as your father, including the way in which a child's body grows into a burden and at the same time expands its organs so they can digest life more easily. And you, you on your part, have been freed from witnessing my wasting away, my failure, my aging and my end.

But I'm writing this letter to you while all of this is still to come, Yoav.

2.

I knew no more than *avec plaisir* in French, the greeting *ce faci* in Romanian, and the crude swear words *kess ekh-tak* in Arabic. Despite the Babylonian abundance of languages, I was born into, everyone at home in Haifa spoke Hebrew to me. Whether out of sheer laziness or out of the erupting pustule of nationalism of those who make Aliyah, the return to the Promised land, my parents never gave me the opportunity to learn the other languages. And although my English has been impeccable ever since my school years, the divorce papers your mother and I signed years ago were in Bulgarian, the only language I learned entirely by ear. Even when we lived together I had enough Bulgarian to manage on my own in places where I had no other choice—in the corner shops, in your kindergarten, in the hairdressers and little workshops, or whenever I was the target of the ubiquitous officials who could only speak a bit of the language that fought on both sides of the Second World War, and now simmers in the quagmire of the Third—with Ukraine. So, we refused a sworn translator. Your mother brought a certificate that proved her to be one, and in her literary, stiff English with a barely discernible Bulgarian accent, deploying a voice that concealed her love and squalor, I heard how we both renounced all claims in the divorce, and you remained entirely under her care.

You were waiting for us in the reception room of the law firm tucked into one of the quieter Sofia streets and furnished with nostalgia for the garish luxury of the '90s. The large marble slabs had resumed a cold-blooded silence under the feet of the couples who came here and whom the divorce, irreversible at this stage, filled with grief or relief, malice or resignation. We found you between the leather sofa and the gilded glass table. You had scattered crayons around the colouring book which other bored children, unaware of what went on in this office, had used. The book was for girls judging by all the fairies and unicorns. Upright, your tongue sticking out, your whole body twisted into one of your masochistic poses, you weren't colouring the childish pictures but had torn out a page and were drawing yet another "diagram" on the back with an ordinary grey pencil. I glanced at it—this one was for waste processing. The various stages were surrounded by rectangles with arrows between them—from loading rubbish into trucks through sorting it into huge pipes to grinding it into some homogenous matter. According to your plan, the final product was to be turned into Lego pieces.

I looked at you with relief. You had missed the signing of the divorce agreement and the heated proceedings in that gaudy office. Under the generous

jet of cold air, paid for by wasted marriages like ours, your skin had retained the temperature of composure. You lifted your head instinctively, looked us up and down with that familiar intent, yet absent gaze, and bent over the sheet of paper again. Only then did I see defeat swell in her eyes. Your mother ushered you to get going, unceremoniously pulled the paper from under the pencil (the point made a long tear in it), examined your drawing, and with the directness she had been practicing ever since we saw *Captain Fantastic*, she asked you, but actually all of us, "Is that a diagram of our family, Yoav?"

Whatever I have thought over the years, I never saw our small, but in fact relatively long-lived, family as a waste plant. (The solicitor informed us that the average length of a marriage was 15.9 years, which made us a "perfectly normal household".) Perhaps the only one who would end up on the waste heap would be me. I, who would have preferred my own parents, your savta and saba, to have divorced long ago. Not because they didn't love each other, there must be ways of loving that are imperceptible to the gaze or brain, but simply for the sake of a truth devoid of needless self-sacrifice for their heirs: that everyone is far more truthful on their own, and that the validity two people acquire as a couple is deceptive. Could your saba Shlomo, the architect, have created the perfect design for the divorce he never dared ask for? Or that of your mother and I, if he had lived long enough? The homes drawn by his hand remained generic on paper, only a few furniture traces indicating the purpose of a room: a sink and a toilet for the bathroom; a table and a sofa for the living room, a bed and a wardrobe for the bedroom. It wasn't apparent from the drawings that those items became much more expensive, elegant and comfortable when Dad left his state job, where he designed bog standard housing for workers and immigrants from Yeruham and Dimona, and began working on luxury private projects in Savyon and Kfar Shmaryahu. It wasn't obvious either what would happen in those rooms in the real, three-dimensional world—love until old age or separation, many children or loneliness, harmony or suicide. Nothing in these drawings indicated that life behind their walls could be infinitely varied. That my father Shlomo had married the wrong sister and occupied the wrong home. That I lived with the wrong parents instead of the ones I felt much more at home with—Aunt Helena and Uncle Ellie. That the room I shared with my brother Omer was essentially quite different from *his* room. And that the apartments and women in my life (or was it the other way round?) changed with the same frequency, but not the foundations of this life, nor the deep conviction that as long as I exist here and now, I love much more what is elsewhere.

Sometimes I wonder whether while drawing the thick lines for the walls, the thin rectangles for the windows, and the right-angled triangles for the doors, Dad put down the technical pen, rested his elbows on the desk amidst the cigarette smoke hovering above and let himself fantasise about the occupants. Whether he was able to predict a different fate for them according to the type of building, the cost of materials, the location and the views. Whether the creative impulse he put into it, like the one supposedly breathed into The Creation, could have predetermined what happened in the prospective homes: a hysterical mother, screaming and running, between hospital shifts, after her three children, one of them with Downs Syndrome (like the people who lived in the apartment above us), or soft jazz, kitten paws and that silvery touch of the chilled glasses of rosé, signifying peaceful intimacy and children not yet born or having moved out.

On the day of the divorce, you, your mother and I eventually left the solicitors, picked our way onto the main street and seamlessly blended in with couples dragging tomorrow's first-years to the last sales. You were going to be Year 1 in a week and your mother's helplessness in the face of you being sucked into an environment she would be unable to control merged with her sense of the other end. The end between us which we had just signed. As always, we weren't ready with anything. Only a month ago, long after the deadline, having filed exception requests in the middle of the night, we managed to enrol you in the private school she had finally chosen. A high-ranking art school where they promised to regard you as a person with infinite potential instead of as a testing ground for graduation exams. The six thousand euros a year your mother agreed for me to pay were the final argument for you to be accepted. And though we had agreed to use the working day to go around the shops—so that this time at least, like "normal parents," we could provide you with the necessary clothes, shoes and school materials on time—we yet again used you as an excuse to postpone the trip. Bored by waiting at the solicitors you violently resisted going shopping, prolonged your whiny "Noooo," yanked on your mother's arm and began hitting her on the back. Only this time she didn't stop in the middle of the street as if defeated, nor did she keep repeating: "Are you really hitting me, Yoav? Do you really hate Mum so much?" but broke away from you, walked pointedly ahead, and without turning around, snapped: "Then we'll go to a patisserie, even if it means you're going to school naked."

I remember that hot, stifling seventh of September—a date the divorce papers had preserved to further facilitate my unfading memory. The low sun glared, as if for one last time, yet I felt cold and prematurely alone, isolated in last

year's coolness I found preserved in the clothes I had pulled out one by one from the unpacked winter storage bags in the past few foggy days. In the unusually suffocating air, the presentiment of autumn was even more palpable. I'd been living with Laura out in the open for almost a month now, and yet she hadn't even sent me a single message to ask how things went with the solicitor, a former schoolmate of hers she had recommended. I knew that she would wait for me to tell her myself, even if this took days; that she would never call him to ask what had happened and what he thought of your mother. Laura's trust in me—a man who had left his wife and son for her, just like that—was completely illogical and at the same time like something straight out of a textbook. If it weren't one of the insidious tricks of her profession as a life-coach, this trust would be reminiscent of the coquettish indifference with which mistresses generously remind their ageing married partners of the luxury of independence.

Perhaps it was precisely because I was aware of it and knew that today was one of the last days the three of us would be together in this exhausting, dense way of ours, that I reached out to grab your mother's hand and she didn't pull away. She just slipped her palm into mine as a sign of God knows what: hopeful surrender, condescending love, or loyal reserve, all contradictory, illogical yet typical feelings of hers. Emotions which, apart from Aunt Heli, only your mother of the three women in my life was capable of. Suddenly you let go of my hand, walked around us and took hers, as if like a wolf cub following a scent you had worked out where and with whom you'd live from now on. My hand continued its pendulum motion, a swing you had just jumped off of without me feeling the loss of your weight. When the pavement became too narrow for the three of us to walk comfortably, your mother seemed to come to her senses, wiped her upper lip and let go of my hand.

I remember that for her, summer wasn't an expanse but a pursuit of shadows; that every dark enclosed space became a refuge. She wore dresses made of light, floating fabrics and never tight cotton clothes on which patches of perspiration stood out. She always carried wipes and waited for the car to cool down completely before getting in. She hated the passengers in the aquarium-like buses, who swam serenely in the sweltering heat, while droplets trickled all the way down to the small of her back. "Only stones don't sweat, only they have nerves that aren't frazzled," she would say. And she would wait for the autumn as if it were an overture to the timelessness of winter when the sun sank into hypothermia and its thin, immaterial light wandered into her day. Your mother came to life then, because her favourite season was the season of invisibility.

We reached the corner of Neofit Rilski Street and headed towards our favourite patisserie. Suddenly, I felt it clearly, we were overcome by the faux brilliance radiated by first-rate parents scurrying along the boulevard. Our lungs filled with the absurd relief the doomed passengers of the *Titanic* must have felt when jumping in the vastness of the icy waters; the chance to save themselves was no longer the size of the sinking ship or the missing boats, but the size of the entire ocean. At last, we entered the garden of the old house where the patisserie is still housed, and with a sudden hunger for something very caloric and unhealthy, located the only free table next to the service entrance, by the ivy-covered stone wall. A pipe ran into the soil below it and the stench immediately reached us—the smell of damp, of sewers, of decay. Its presence snatched away the illusory elation that often overcomes people at the finishing line and I thought that your mother wouldn't be able to resist commenting. She would hint that the airy-fairy design of the place, combined with this foul, musty, putrid smell that was in such a contrast to its claims, was a trap, just like our marriage had turned out to be.

But she didn't, Yoav. She hung her bag on the chair and went to the toilet to freshen up and you went to look at the cakes in the display case that you already knew by heart. You came back and announced, the same as always, that you wanted the cake 'for girls', and scurried off to find toys in the children's corner. And then, while she and I were silently staring at the newly updated prices (the menus always looked the same), your mother picked up the card, as if seeing a sign there, and proposed exactly what I am doing right now: for each of us to write something like an explanation about everything that happened and even about the things before. "And when he gets older…"

I interrupted.

"How old?"

"I don't know," she admitted, "I don't know, Ilan. I don't want Yoav to get old. Never. I just want him to know. But when and how much of this knowledge he will be able to bear, I have no idea."

"To bear or to understand?" I asked. Because to know and to understand are two different things. As different as knowing why you live like you do and being able to live that way.

"In this case, let's just accept that there are things for which you are never old enough," she interrupted me. "Maybe that's why it doesn't matter when you discover them."

"As long as it's the truth, right?" I said.

"Enough with this truth!" she burst out before almost instantly calming herself. After a while she added guiltily, "It sounds like a headline in a tabloid: 'The truth—a rape victim who prostituted herself regularly' or 'The truth behind the death of such and such a pop star.' Do you get what this means? That by default we all live in a widespread lie, that we need someone to explicitly, covertly and at their own risk to enlighten us about the 'truth'. You know this is not what I mean."

I knew she didn't mean this. Perhaps—contrary to the controlling character she nurtured over the years—you mother still wanted you to hear my side of the story. To know my memories. Presented to you in the most authentic way, the way that had once brought us together, the only way she approved of—through words, through writing.

I remember telling her back then that our boy could take absolutely anything. I said it with conviction, unusual for me, because that was the excuse I believe to this day. And in that instant, I realised I no longer had the right to this "our boy," that possessive pronouns are the most uncertain, the most vulnerable part of grammar. Because by the time you become a man without my involvement, age will have taken you away from both of us, your mother and me. If I had decided not to interfere in your life from then on, I wouldn't have the right to define you, even though in those days I was still unaware of the extent of my absence. The only right I had was to simply call you Yoav—the third person in our family, the one who came out of us. Yoav, who for a short time, but only seemingly, would remain hers before becoming someone who belonged only to himself.

She sort of nodded. It was a somewhat wavy movement, like the icy waves under the *Titanic*. It was so vague that it could have been taken for agreement as well as for denial. A movement that quickly died out, it didn't sway her greying auburn hair, it didn't stir the light in her eyes, the colour of autumn leaves, it didn't ripple her pale lips, sealed as if holding onto a black pearl. At that moment, in the foetid shade of the stone wall, your mother looked as if she had grown tired of being tired. Resignation had already coated her face like a thick cream, unsuitable for her complexion. Involuntarily I remembered two of the many wisdoms your saba Victor drummed into me when I was little: "If a man says something, but no woman hears it, is he still incorrect?" and "If you want a woman, don't marry her." I had committed this and all the other mistakes he had tried to protect me from.

You came back without a toy. The wavy strands of hair that would be trimmed a few days later for convenience, stuck to your forehead and temples. Instinctively, I pulled you into my arms—the smell of street dust on hot asphalt,

of distant fields. An illusion of timelessness. “They only have things for babies there,” you complained and asked for my phone so you could watch yet another YouTuber wax lyrical about the mysterious male character in Minecraft—the game in which, for some time, you had been constructing your own walls, buildings and worlds. While your mother and I pounced on the cakes to mark the disintegration of ours.

Radoslav *B*IMBALOV

You, My Likeness

Radoslav Bimbalov published his first novel in 1998 before he pivoted to the advertising business and founded one of the largest independent communication groups in Bulgaria. He decided to publish his work again only a few years ago—in Bulgaria, through Ciela Publishing. First, a collection of short stories titled *Shut Up* appeared, followed by the novel *Ecstasis*. Both were nominated for all the major literary awards in Bulgaria, while *Ecstasis* was also shortlisted for the Novel of the Year award. The latter was published in Italian in May 2025 by the Italian publishing house Wojtek Edizioni. His most recent book *You, My Likeness* appeared in September 2024, became a bestseller and was also shortlisted in Novel of the Year award.

About the book

A dystopian story about our modern society where compassion is officially declared a weakness and a vice. Narrated by God himself.

God decides to break his silence to tell us a strange story, but also to share his personal observations on humans and the tragic changes that have occurred in their behavior. There are five major characters in the story and their destinies intertwine in the plot. First comes Teach, an English teacher who gets fired for helping a student in a street fight. He is accused of feeling and expressing compassion. For Teach this is a real shock, but he gradually realizes that he lives in a world where empathy has officially been declared a vice. Teach's life changes drastically, but also doctors find a tumor in his brain and claim it's the reason for his strange display of compassion.

The second character is Nat, Teach's ex, an accountant who has a dull everyday routine, with a total lack of emotions in her life. Nat doesn't express any interest in Teach's sufferings, she is too angry with him because he has ruined her life by making her the mother of his son. The third character is Teach's current intimate partner—the music teacher Yo, an heiress of a rich family who has turned her hereditary apartment into a roadside inn. Yo was raised by cold-blooded parents, who taught her to be as thick-skinned as possible to survive in this world. She consumes life, men, and music with equal greed. The fourth character of the story is a friend of Yo and Teach's—an old man named Shimmy, who is shrouded in mystery—a master of conspiracy theories who has become a popular TV personality. The fifth main hero is Nat's new boyfriend—Bo, a sadistic man who slowly and persistently has risen through the ranks of the state propaganda system. Everything turns around for him when authorities give him the opportunity to explore one of his ideas—a state program called THE FAMILY, which categorizes people by their health status and lets people legally hand over their sick relatives to the state. There are drastic consequences for those like Teach, who still feel compassion—unless they undergo life-changing surgery to remove the tumor causing this emotion.

Falling into life category B, Teach quickly realizes that he suffers many restrictions. He can't afford to pay for the tumor removal, but the conspiracy guru Shimmy offers him the option of letting the television company pay for the surgery by having the doctors perform it live, on-air, with his skull open, while viewers ask him ruthless questions. Teach has no choice and accepts. At the same time, Nat becomes an accountant in Bo's program. As THE FAMILY's treatment

centers become overwhelmed, Bo introduces the next phase of his program: euthanizing patients. The State Lottery is also used to control the population of patients transferred to the state. Each week, the numbers drawn for the Lottery are the numbers of those patients who are euthanized at the request of their new legal relatives – i.e. THE FAMILY. In an emotional moment, after having found out that shocking truth, Nat hits Bo with a large wooden figurine. He crumples to the floor unconscious, and she decides to continue beating his lifeless body. At that moment, Teach comes to their house, after just having been released from the hospital and now looking for his son. The ex-teacher immediately rushes to save Bo and succeeds, then stays put to take the blame for the beating while Nat and the child run away.

Then it starts pouring rain. It rains for weeks, there are terrible floods; lands, creatures, and people perish. The fear of the flood gradually takes hold of everyone. The narrator God explains that he chose Teach to show compassion and save Bo (who will thus be punished "to live in his prison of a body"). The Creator admits that what pours down is simply called rain, nothing more and nothing less, and he gives the most important, eternally sought-after answer to the main dilemma: who created whom.

"I, the most absent part of your life, am not a creature, not an idea, not a forethought, not one thing. I am as many as you. Every time you feel as if you are encouraging or punishing yourself, mentally pointing out your flaws, or holding yourself back—I am there too. Your silent argument with me is the only balance you are capable of. Every time I pass away with you but then I come back—with you, I rise again. With you, and with you, and with you. Yes, with you, too."

Novel, 304 pages
ISBN: 9789542848325
Ciela Norma Publishing,
2024

You, My Likeness

E X C E R P T *Translated by Christopher Buxton*

"When the Holy One, Blessed be His Name, reached the moment of creating Adam, the first human, He took counsel with the serving angels and told them, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.' They asked Him, 'This man, what is his nature?' He answered them: 'The righteous will be his issue.'"

Tora Bereshit

"When your Lord said to the angels: 'I am placing on the earth one that shall rule as My deputy,' they replied: 'Will You put there one that will do evil and shed blood, when we have for so long sung Your praises and sanctified Your name?' He said: 'I know what you do not know.'"

The Quran—The Cow
(Translation by N.J.Darwood, Penguin, 1956)

"And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was morning and there was evening, the sixth day."

The Bible (King James version)
Genesis

In the beginning was a bit of heavy wood. Two old hands, black and dry, carved it for a whole week. The sharpness of the knife cut away what was not needed, turning deftly, shaping large ears, a rounded forehead, short sturdy legs, a thrusting trunk. The wooden elephant was later prettified with the frayed old brush—becoming brown with large yellow spots. They left it to dry outside, on the dingy shelf beneath an awning, amongst chicken feathers and the yellowish dust from the nearby desert. It was part of the abandoned yard for days and nights, years on end, till one day someone decided to scrape off the bird droppings and throw it under the tarpaulin of a battered lorry. Along with glazed masks, hollow drums, black figurines of naked women with pendulous breasts and incompetently carved lions, the wooden elephant first reached an overstocked market stall. It was the largest item there, it jutted out high over

the menagerie of souvenirs, its trunk lifted towards the faces of passers-by. Eyes looked it over, noses sniffed it, hands grabbed it, lifted it with effort and turned it. They lowered its price in several languages, more and more, until in the end it was wrapped up in a canvas rucksack, and thrown on the floor in the belly of a military plane. The wooden elephant flew through thousands of kilometers of cloud and landed in a dusty cellar. They left it on top of an empty barrel and threw a greasy rag around its trunk. It remained forgotten in the dark, and when airplanes began to sow death outside, the barrel under its feet would jump with every fallen bomb. A few decades passed, the forgotten elephant stood in silence in the bolted cellar of the abandoned house, but one day the earth shook like never before, it swallowed up the house and the cellar, along with the darkness, the barrel and the elephant. They discovered it when they dug up through the ruins from the earthquake. They carried it to a little antique shop on a paved street, covered in snow and exchanged it for a miserable bank note. The wooden elephant became part of a sad community of junk for sale, being itself an invalid, missing half a leg, but its long trunk still pointed upwards,

Probably towards

Me

It was purchased after some time and took up a proud stance on this shiny floor, where now it lies exhausted. The heavy wooden elephant stood at attention at its post, up till the moment it was lifted to bash into a skull, to tear skin and carve out wounds, to crush bones, smash joints, till it became a dusky red—from the blood of the lifeless human body on the floor.

The good old elephant. As soon as I saw it, drying on that dingy shelf under the awning I knew,

it would do

the job.

FIRST ORATION

How easy it would have been if the stories about you and me had been the absolute truth.

If it were true that you were my perfectly finished work, that you'd received the name Adam from me, because you were made from dust. Or there again, you were created from the sweat of a giant called Ymir, and perhaps you were called Ask or Embla, cast up on the seashore like a bit of lifeless driftwood.

And why weren't you that "thousand-headed, thousand-eyed, thousand-

legged" Purusha, "lord of immortality"—a strange creature which lives both in the heart and in the Cosmos. Eventually you might call yourself Phoroneus, son of the river god Inachus and the nymph Melia.

As a last resort you might have been Gayomart, with a soul of gold, which was scattered and from his mighty pearls of sperm Mashya and Mashyana sprouted in the shape of a rhubarb clump.

If none of this sounds acceptable so far, I have a simpler story. It's not my invention, it's yours again—back from the time when you didn't know if there was anything beyond Africa. Here's a brief summary. One day a frog crawled out onto the beach. Before it, there'd been nothing—an empty sky, like a washed spoon with a shining moon inside it. The poor moon, that romantic soul, had the idea to create a man, but was utterly trusting (clearly from loneliness) and told this to the frog. The frog, nasty plagiarist that he was, beat the moon to it, blowing himself up like a balloon and suddenly giving birth to a pair of twins—a man and a woman, who turned out to be the first humans on the earth. Of course, the moon was furious and charred the frog to ashes, as it sat there on the lonely beach. In the end the good moon became the world's first foster parent and brought up your ancestors—the froggie twins, calling the boy Batet and the girl Hannah.

After everything laid out above, I really do understand why your story of the man made from clay has survived the longest. In the Old Testament, it is written: "For dust thou art and to dust thou shall return," while in the Quran there are scattered verses, confirming the same: "He has knowledge of all you hide and all that you reveal, All Powerful, all Merciful, creating all in perfection, and beginning the creation of mankind from clay." It's somehow nice to read definitions of myself.

I reckon it's vanity,
clearly nothing of yours
will be alien to me
since you are mine at least a little.

But getting back to the clay. Abu Musa al-Ashari recites one of his beautiful parables in which his faithful companion, the Prophet Mohammed, says: "Allah created Adam from a handful of dust which he took from all over the earth ; so the children of Adam are in accordance with the earth : some red, some white, some black, some a mixture, also smooth and rough, bad and good." Here I must admit that even I, who personally know how it happened, am close to believing

in this.

Let's jump ahead. A mere century ago, before my very eyes, Vernadski was investigating clay. The guy was a talented Soviet scholar and, as if out of duty to his motherland, an atheist. But despite this, Vladimir discovered a range of curious things that bore witness to your most cherished illusion. Within its sticky composition were all the micro- and macro-elements that exist in your human organism. And however strange it might seem, they were found in almost the same proportions.

For the story of your magical creation to become entirely successful, a whole pantheon of important folks had paid their dues. Michelangelo ordered his apprentices to raise scaffolding up to the ceiling in the Apostolic See. I watched him, hanging there for six years to scandalize the Cardinals with his corporeal realism. He even painted himself (or more precisely, his great granddad Adam) as a glistening, muscle-bound hunk, carelessly reclining and scandalously naked, reaching out towards me (or rather, your image of me). The Pope at the time came to view his commission, accompanied by his Master of Ceremonies, Biago da Cesena, who hissed unambiguously, "these images are suitable for some inn, and not for a holy chapel." Michelangelo Buonarroti got his revenge on this jealous crank by painting him into the fresco with his genitals constricted by a snake—taking the place of King Minos, the judge of the souls of the dead.

Back to the plot of your best story—you've described how after I create you from mud, I send you into such a deep sleep that I can take a rib and from it create you as well, the first female being, named Eve. It's not clear why your fantasy didn't stop there—you could have simply played your habitual "and they lived happily ever after." But no, you decide to challenge this story of yours—and not for the first time, I might add. And so a frightening legend was passed from ear to ear (even reaching my own, if can you imagine) that Eve, created from a rib, was not Adam's first companion, instead she'd had a predecessor, Lilith by name. One of your sacred books even carries the seeds of this doubt—in Genesis: "And God created man in His own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them," but in the next chapter, it's as if you've suddenly forgotten your idea about this simultaneous appearance of the first couple and you rush to tell how I broke one of your ribs with my bare hands while you were asleep, to create you, my fragile Eve. Yet despite all these efforts, nothing can erase your heretical idea about Lilith.

She was so fiery and willful that after she was banished (by me), she turned into one of the most powerful demons ever to walk the Earth. In spite of this,

Adam desired her yet again. So to fulfill your desire (so your story goes), three angels, my messengers, appeared before Lilith with this threat: "If she refuse to return, a thousand of her children would die every day." Not only did she not return, but she grew so bitter that she decided to take her punishment into her own hands. She turned into a vampire who fed on the flesh of newborn babes and men she killed. At this point she became so wicked that it's entirely understandable that you spared no pains in rejecting Lilith. By the way, I forgot to mention why (according to this account) she was banished by me. In her latest row with Adam, in a fit of anger Lilith did the unforgiveable—she pronounced aloud the four forbidden letters, which should never be uttered and which spell out, you know, my name.

We'll get to my name, everything in its proper time. First, let's focus on the beginning,

If it were my creation, from clay,
if your every
little hole
had been carved,
if every one
of your curves
had been smoothed
by my fingers.
You'd still be
under my nails.
But you're not there.
You're not.

Surely you're wondering by now so I'll go ahead and answer—I started to talk to you so you would pay attention, after all. I usually stay silent, and you talk to me, oh how you talk! You fall on your knees before me, you light candles, you kiss my painted hands, you swear upon dusty books or ancient scrolls that you'll give me everything I want.

How did you decide
that something
was ever asked
of you?

You're not going to read what I am telling you in a crumpled magazine, you're not going to hear it down at the pub, on the street or even on the television (that Holiest of Holies where most folks are concerned). I will only describe what

I have seen, I, the "all-seeing." You got that word right, actually.

After all I can
peek
into every life,
at any time,
no matter
the place,
the epoch or
the obstacles.

I've always found you interesting, no two ways about it. I was in the dark fear of your caves, in the testosterone of your wars, in the sighs of all your sexual revolutions, even in the isolation of your cosmic wandering. I recognize your declines and renaissances, I watch from the front row all your discoveries and all your mistakes. I admit—your tendency to dramatize your own earthly mishaps always irritates me. Your fear often stinks worse than the battlefield of Verdun.

Perhaps I'll tell you more about Verdun later. But before that—it's time to mention a Cambridge first-class theology graduate. His name was Charles Darwin.

My old friend, fate, has always entertained me with her flair for irony. Just get a load of this—Charles Darwin was studying to be a doctor, but he got bored so his father decided to punish him by sending him to study theology, thinking he'd become a pastor. And it was precisely this Charles Darwin who demolished the most exquisite legend about your creation, which was the foundation of most flourishing religions in this world.

Over the course of five years, Darwin circled the shores of South America, Australia and Africa in the Royal Navy ship, the *Beagle*. I didn't share his excitement at the everyday observation of birds, lizards and tortoises—perhaps I'd gotten to know these creatures too long ago. Except that in the Galapagos Islands, Darwin discovered something he found interesting—on different islands set apart some distance from one another, lived similar but not quite identical mockingbirds. The difference was quite visible—the species that ate big hard seeds possessed large fat beaks, while those who hunted and sucked up little flies and worms had developed thin sharp beaks.

Disembarking from the *Beagle*, Darwin believed less and less in the story

of the man made from clay, and twenty years later, published that notorious book with its absurdly long title: *On the Origin of Species by Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life,* understandably more famous as *On the Origin of Species.*

After this book, it was really difficult for your creation to be chalked up to me, yet you stubbornly continue to hope, somewhere deep in your soul, that you are mine. You surely don't want to accept the truth that no-one has sculpted you like an exquisite statuette from a bit of sticky earth, that instead you have travelled alone, continuing down the million-year road you first clambered to your feet upon, then developed skills, conquered fire and began cooking your food, learning to talk and sharing your life in society.

No, don't start fixing me with that disappointed look. Doesn't the fact that I've been following you for your entire journey tell you something?

Even if it turns out
I'm not your real
parent,
I likely see you as
my own child.

Yes, that's what the moon says.

Photo: Natasha Maneva

Krasimir *D*IMOVSKI

Theseus and His Labyrinth

Krasimir Dimovski grew up in Yavrovo, between the large Mogila mountain and the small Mogilchitsa hill. This magical place energizes his modern prose, which is distinguished by its unique style.

After nearly thirty years of silence, he published his book of 13 short stories, *The Girl Who Predicted the Past* (2021), followed by *The Mermaid Hunter*—three novellas about love and rage (2022)—and the novel *Theseus in His Labyrinth* (2024). These works have won the *Portal Kultura* prose award, the prose award of the Union of Bulgarian Writers, the national Miloš Zyapkov award, and the Plovdiv award twice. He was also nominated for the European Union Prize for Literature.

In 2025, *Theseus in His Labyrinth* won the 13 Centuries of Bulgaria National Literary Award for Bulgarian Novel of the Year, and was nominated for the *Portal Kultura* award.

About the book

What would happen to mankind if it turned out that God was a girl? Is it right to save someone who does not want to be saved? What is Dozlo and why is it deadly dangerous for people? These questions assail Theseus—an uneducated but sharp-witted man—and throw him into the labyrinth of events...

The novel is dynamic, readable, full of twists and turns. *Theseus in His Labyrinth* is a sort of continuation of the author's previous books *The Girl Who Foretold the Past* and *The Mermaid Hunter*, completing the thematic trilogy.

"*Theseus in his Labyrinth*: from here, from the very beginning, which every book title is, we understand that this is an unexpected text before us, burning and unique. Because everyone knows: in labyrinths there are only minotaurs and generals; the Theseuses behave differently—they escape from them. Krasimir Dimovski's Theseus, however, inserts himself into the labyrinth with all his might, inserting us too, flying us into a special, strange, exceptional world; a world in which masculine grammatical endings apply even for the female gender, and a violin is like a thread, Ariadne's thread. It is with this thread that Krasimir Dimovski and his Theseus lure us: 'Here, here reader, over here!,' and draw us deep into a novel space that we wander through, amazed, startled, and enchanted. Enchanted by the talent, the magic, and the beauty of writing…"

Mitko Novkov, literary critic

Novel, 320 pages
ISBN: 9789542624158
Hermes Publishing House,
2024

Theseus in His Labyrinth

or The Diary of Miss P.

E X C E R P T *Translated by Traci Speed*

Part One
THE TEMPTATION

1.

The silences started getting thicker; I inhaled them in several breaths and filled up on them.

These here silences turned my Life* upside down. They flipped it heels up, and its two heads hung down backwards. The situation being that my Life has a man's body; as for the lady kind—that I don't know. Up to then I lived sprinkled with scattered sunshine, and here and there, with fog, which would flood us all. And this is the way I reckoned to live it out to the end. But Theseus proposes, and the silences dispose. These thick silences that we all appeared from with a cry and that we'll return back into again, followed by cries.

*In Theseus's village, sometimes people like to capitalize words to underscore their significance, while they write unfamiliar personal names with a lowercase letter. There are also other peculiarities that come out in their orthography.

They rained down on me one after another through nineteen niney-four, after the eighteenth of May, at dawn, when the evil came in with a growl. The sun had just started tickling an old thought of mine that morning, fuck'im!

In order they were like this:

The First Silence—when the newcomers led away the mayor and she was so darkened by horror that only her large breasts beamed.

The Third—when I found the Diary, and then the silent song no one else could sense permeated me.

The Fourth—as soon as I heard the girl's shriek, but then I still didn't know that a shout of horror and a shout of passion was one and the same.

The Fifth—when that dreadful man was silently contorting his lips like a fish because the moans were still burning in his mouth from the advent of the flames I'd lit up.

There were a Sixth and a Seventh... but I'll stop here. They turned me upside down. And pierced me. Kindness flowed out of one hole, and malice flowed in through the other.

2.

I skipped the second silence on purpose 'cause, looking at them now, it seems to of become the most vital one for me. I'll tell you about it, then I'll go through them in order.

It was a quiet summer evening, fuck'er! I stepped out in the middle of the night to take a leak; in the dark, the fireflies were pretending to be fleeting stars, like the cosmos had set itself down in my yard. I felt majestic and I raised my stream to give this feeling a soundtrack.

And amidst the whizzing I heard a muffled wheezing.

It came in a growl, but then in a choking and now in a whining, but suppressed, like it was coming from under water. I looked around—it wasn't from that cosmos that'd come down to me, but farther away. I climbed up the fence to see from up high; my eyes traveled over the ceramic tiles, reached the roof of the church, clad in moss-trimmed stone slabs, then crawled along the bell tower and stopped.

Mother!

The tin cupola, painted ocher, shone like gold, and on the metal cross above it, reinforced with a frame, a person was crucified. The moon shone like a runaway halo, disseminating a mysterious luminosity through the whole chapel, and only the crucified silhouette showed blue.

I hiccupped and crossed myself.

Jesus is come, I say, this here, says I, is the Second Coming, but why did he honor our little church of all places, and not some cathedral?

I ran right in there, but as I got closer, my entire Bible learning flipped:

Christ was a woman!

She was crucified naked, her white skirt gathered around her flanks, just like Jesus' garment, her hands fastened to the iron cross, her outthrust breasts shining,

and her bare legs straddling the dome, just like it was pushing to impregnate her with some new faith.

Holy faith, I shout, it'll come out that the Savior's a lady, so that's why he can't bring order to this world—who's afraid of a petticoat!

I crossed myself just in case, but my clenched fingers froze: now the chapel was drenched in blue, and her body was glowing so I could make out her mouth, tied with a bandana. That's where those strangled wheezes were coming from, they were blowing it up in the front and drifting into the night silence, strained through the bandana.

Horror petrified me, and I barely managed to break myself to run back, I burrowed in my house and took fever.

Not till sunrise did I muster the courage to look on the cupola; it was playing with the sunrays, only that one shoulder of the cross had tilted.

That lady Christ had ascended!

There weren't a trace of her... And then I thought I'd had a vision, I'd gone nuts. But after that night, it turned out that all the few humankind between Mogila and Mogilchitsa, which had remained mainly women, had gone nuts.

That was the big silence that flipped me upside down. It overwhelmed my entire thinking and started whirling slowly through all my cavities, breaking them apart one by one.

We're gonna have to, says I, save the Savior. Mother!

3.

And now—for the next silence in a row. Although I don't know if the order is God's doing or man's. According to God's, first you're born, then you die. But according to man's, it can be the other way around—I know them ones by name and face that died first and then was born—their portraits hung in the school that used to be. There were also a baby from the houses down the way that was born, it died and was buried, then a boar dug it up and it came back to life and was born again—this time from the womb of the earth. So, I say to myself, disorder distinguishes man from gods. Or maybe it can also unite them, what do I know.

I was walking past Musina with an armful of wood; it was fixing to get dark. The evening was starting to permeate me too, but before the darkness totally fell, I saw it.

It were a creature of some sort, on the banks of the pond, touching the water; as if it was white, but its whiteness had already humbled itself and was gathering up the aforenight silence, like me, so I couldn't immediately judge its color, nor its liveliness, nor its strangeness, so I broke my own rule and slid down on my ass. I got hold of it a second before the water carried it away, I saved it in a way but I slipped into the pond myself. The cold hit me and the silence jumped right out of me.

I felt brisk as at sunrise!

That's what I hate most, being the opposite of the world—it's getting ready for sleep, and I'm rising, it's getting dark, and I'm dawning. May sweet holy nature forgive me, but because of this backwardness I still can't square myself up with a woman so that she can rid me of my virginity, fuck'er!

I turned that thing around in my hands, to get it into my eyes. To assimilate it. It went in me.

It was some kind of folder with sheets of paper, all wrapped in twine. From the writing on top I recognized the letter *D*; the rest gave me trouble.

Reading is not my strength; my strength is in my corpus—it boils up inside me, fills me like steam and tenses me taut. And as soon as I swing, all that tension goes into the blow.

So with one fist I killed my mule, I hit him between the eyes, them that looked at me all humanistically. They were like that, but everything else about him were evil—from his hooves to his ears, he trembled and his colors changed down to the last hair, he'd absorbed all the evils that came around from his mulish doing and had added some from the cosmos even.

The evil of the cosmos shows up at night, when it's black and starless.

That animal would kick something ferocious, as if to say hello; it once tried me too, and then I whacked it. It didn't say a word. And it collapsed. And its whole humanistic gaze split off and dispersed like a thin mist, went off to fortify some other humanism around the planet. Its eyes emptied out, I'd peeked into them—a deep emptiness, looked to me that it reached all the way to the bottom of hell. I tried to close them, but they weren't people's, they couldn't. So I buried him in the yard, sightful.

Now, when I walk over it, that emptiness burns my heels and if it's toward evening, it lodges in me and then I dream hollowly. And a hollow dream leaves no memory.

So from this murder I got the name Theseus, and the few humankind between Mogila and Mogilchitsa started venerating me. Well, back then I still hadn't crushed a human skull, may sweet holy nature forgive me! Although the mule's is much harder.

I tucked the folder to my naked skin under my wet shirt, hurried home, and nightfall came upon me again. And I feel like I'm walking briskly, but all my body parts are moving slowly, my legs, my arms, and my more subtle parts, and my breathing is slow, sliding out my mouth, fanning my whiskers, and in sundry ways intoxicating me in reverse, like thick wine. If someone saw me from the side, they'd say to themselves that Theseus'd been hitting the bottle, but I was intoxicated by some kind of sobriety...

But where in the world had this condition come over me?

And the more I walk, the more it churns me and lifts me up, spreads me over the evening and it spreads inside me and makes me like a slow bird. You could say that music's started up, that I don't hear, but I feel it. This isn't music, though, it's only this to the touch. It brushes my skin, absorbs me and thins me, numbs me, then inflates me and thins me out again, disperses me and gathers me back in. Wow!

It's like I'm the music and I'm hearing myself, that is–I feel myself. I am the feeling that I feel.

And at some point I grasp with my muddled brain that this whole tuning is coming from in front of me, exactly where I'd tucked that damn thing, the folder. It was welling up exactly there and radiating me…

I ran right home and pulled the folder from under my shirt and threw it onto the table. And suddenly the mild sobriety that had intoxicated me seeped away and I came to myself. Damn, says I, I survived! What was that magic I brought upon myself… I didn't dare touch it anymore, I just stared at the letters, but I can't, you know, whatever them, can I, so I say to myself: Tomorrow I'll take it to Smilenina to read me them.

Only, says I, I hope that thing don't set my house alight while I'm sleeping, if some kind of radiation has built up in it. But while I was fretting, I must of fell asleep, worn out by the transfiguration.

The Gray Planet was famous for its digitalization. The digits from 0 to 9 were raised to a cult after the discovery that their countless combinations brought prosperity. The world was convenient and predictable.

And so as not to destroy anything in its harmony, scholars transformed the Bible into a phonebook. Parables, fables, and legends were replaced by the digital telephone numbers of the angels and God.

So instead of sending off abstract prayers in the churches, the locals could connect with a particular personage from the heavenly army, according to their needs.

Faith, imagination, and doubts were forgotten.

Spiritual trepidations as well.

The system cracked when a higher up official from the central digitalization office accidentally decoded the devil's phone number.

The official fell madly in love, started writing poetry, took to believing in God, and threw himself from the twelfth floor.

4.

In the morning I mustered up the courage to reach for the folder again, tucked it to my chest, and headed for Smilenina's. But this time I didn't feel anything, as if that magic had used up its strength, and I might have exhausted myself too. Since the newcomers took over the school, all of us in the village've been exhausting ourselves.

I looked around to make certain they didn't jump out of the gate, and I ran across the street.

I knock on Smilenina's door and I say to myself: is the sun looking down on me sleepily or is it not paying me any mind at all? Surely not. Desolate vastness, mother!

Smilenina opened the door to me and it reeked of all her learning. I still remember that scent from the school desk, when she tried to load me with learning. She couldn't load in a thing. Not a single letter stayed in my leaky head, everything was oozing out. So much knowledge oozed out that alongside me, even grandma caught on and started sounding out words, and only I remained primordially pristine.

Now I say to her, Comrade Smilenina Ma'am, and I start explaining to her what I've come for, and she looks at me somber like and goes to let out the hens. Then she goes in and comes out of the room where a whole shelf of books lives independently. I've counted them—there were 29, different thicknesses,

but all the same height. Whatever was in them must of only been able to grow widthwise.

Smilenina looked at me somber again, but it wasn't from a grudge at me—that darkness had affected everyone's eyes since the newcomers had settled in the school.

That's where the fear came from. As if it strikes like lightning, but when it touches you, it tarnishes you with darkness. I've never seen a scared person shine, on the contrary—they darken. It's a mystery to me how the brightness leaves a dark trace, but it does. It soaks into your eyes, and then—into your voice, your stomach, and between your legs, and there it stains you, depending on whether you're a man or woman. That's why the darkened ones can't couple with each other. Can't screw. Can't fuck each other. Can't reproduce. No. That's how both the fun stops, and the babies stop. Darkened mankind is both barren and unhappy. It can't make itself happy, nor can it continue. And supposedly it's alive, but it's dead. That kind of existence—living dead—is the most terrible, it's like breathing with a noose around your neck. That's why I hate fear so much. And there you go, I say to myself, you can't overcome even it by reading, Smilenina has read up 29 books, and she's a lot more skeered than me. And older, more unhappy, more despondent.

"Come slaughter me a chicken tomorrow morning, cause my daughter's coming. What've you come for?" That's what she said to me with her tarnished voice.

I pull the folder out from under my shirt, warmed by my existence. I smooth it and leave it on the table. Smilenina looks at it and seems to light up for a minute, as if a smile pierces her, but I don't catch whether it's flattering or mocking.

"I found this thing, Comrade Ma'am,"—that's what I call her, since back when she was my teacher, she was a comrade—"so I want you to explain it to me, cause it's worrying me."

"And why would you be so frightened of a folder!" she cries.

"Well, it's a folder," says I, "but not quite. When I tucked in against my chest, something happened to me."

"And what exactly happened to you?" She scrutinized me and I was ashamed that I'd sounded twofold and I hid the front of myself with the folder.

"Well, some music permeated me," says I, "but it wasn't exactly music, cause I didn't hear it."

"And what is this music that isn't heard?" Smilenina asked in astonishment.

"I just felt it," says I. "But it wasn't exactly a feeling even. Otherwise, it were music to the touch... And then I became the feeling I was feeling..."

"Lordy, stop!" Smilenina shouted and clasped her head. Rays of light appeared between her fingers, short ones. Her brain, I say to myself, is oozing out. "And what do you want from me?"

"Read me, Comrade Ma'am," says I, "the title, so we can see what it's about."

"Well, you read then!" she says. "We have the letter D, then I, then A... Come on!"

"Dairy," says I.

And she pouted: "If you'd studied instead of milking cows, you wouldn't be reading 'dairy.'"

It's starting, I say to myself, and I shut myself down.

Daddy knew all the letters, but grandpa didn't. And I doubt my grandpa's grandpa did, and as for the mule I killed, I'm sure he didn't know. And there were mules and unlearned folks a thousand years ago, and even a thousand times thousand years ago. And when I look around, there are birds, bees, crickets, and the wolves behind Mogila, and the carnivorous bears, and the eagles, and the rabbits from Mogilchitsa, and the foxes, all this self-propelled stuff has never so much dreamed of a letter. It doesn't even suspect its existence. But it doesn't stop living, and it can do with less trouble than Smilenina. I asked her when books were invented, and she told me—four hundred years ago. So all the other times, everything alive lived without books, fuck'em!

But now I keep silent, and she reads:

"*The Diary of Miss P.*, that's what it says!" And she waves a finger, which thickens my breath, because a memory from my school days came back to me. "Just a diary. There is nothing supernatural. Do you know," she asks, "what a diary is?"

"Well," says I, "it's got nothing to do with cows, is it?"

A quick smile cut through her darkness again, and sharply this time. She let out a big sigh, almost blowing me away, you'd wonder how she contained it under her dry tits. And she says, "No, no it's not. A diary is something more to do with women, usually. It's intimate," she says. "They write their emotions or other ideas... Like what, for example, they might do in this life."

"And they write it down when someone does it to them, don't they?" says I, but I was immediately sorry.

"Heaven forbid!" Smilenina shrieks again, as if I'd said something wicked. Her shriek pierced my eyes; I winced and she relented. "They might write that down, too," she said more gently, "that's their business. But it's not proper to peek in someone else's diary, nor is it honorable."

And this time it hit me. In my honor. Because my honor is great, if they aggravate it a little, it will thrust itself out, just like my other thing, powerful and exciting, not like some virgin who says, my one honor remains—no, from my father I have a yard, a house, a goat, chickens, a mule before I killed him, and that's why I don't complain about being honorable and poor, although it's nicer to be honorable and rich.

I got goosebumps.

Madame Comrade Smilenina sensed me and her darkness thickened; I had clearly piled another layer of fear on her. And she told me more softly that it would be best to find out who the one whose name begins with P. was, to think about it and if I remembered, to bring her the Diary, since it was wrapped up. Because, she says, right now this woman is very worried, trembling with shame. Try to find her because of that. That, she says, would be the act of a gentleman. To me, that word sounded ominous, like a gentleman, but I decided that she was flattering me and I puffed up a little.

And I promised.

"Now," says I, "I'm going to my place and I'll start making my way through all the P's in the village, irregardless of sex or age." That's how I blurted it out, but I immediately corrected myself: "Without sex," says I, "it's clearly written that it's a Miss P., not a Mr. P, ain't it!"

"Good," says Smilenina. "And remember that she'll be grateful to you for life, until she's about to depart, like me."

Departing, huh, I say to myself, but seeing how the universal fear of the newcomers has seeped into her eyes, she still intends to stick around a little while. Since she's afraid, then she feels like living. Besides, when her end comes, if she has a Diary, it will only make it easier for Saint Peter—instead of telling him how and what she is, she can just give it to him to read. If he knows how. But since they say he writes down sins, that means he can read. Although, as a saint, he must be older than the oldest alphabet... Well, it's his business.

I took the Diary and left. In farewell, Smilenina asked me where I'd found it, and when she learned it was by the river, she exclaimed, "Oh, so she has a romantic nature."

Screw'er!

5.

I went out onto the little street and was filled with relief, but the sun made it flutter away from me. Smilenina had put a right burden on me! Where should I look for this P. now, to save her honor, damn her! It truly turned out that letters only bring trouble. I, without knowing them, barely touched them and they made brought me worries, let alone if I'd read them. He who increases reading, increases sorrow!

This here insight broke me, but suddenly it dawned on me: why don't I leave this damn thing in the same place where I found it! Besides, that one, the romantic, will remember to look for it where she was romanticizing.

As soon as I appeared at the pond, a bubbling light emerged from its waters and took my breath away.

I dropped the Diary on the bank and turned to walk away, but the light pinched my brain, and I started feeling romantic, too. I unbuttoned myself and squatted down to take a shit, and all around nature was humming, the hum rose, piercing the sky and continuing into the cosmos; those, says I, who are spinning in the station above, surely hear it now and are enlightened like me, but when they look through the hatches, they don't see Theseus squatting on the planet. Because they see it as an entirety somehow.

But I here am.

And this thought brought me cosmic pride.

I got up and looked around for something to wipe myself with, I didn't see any paper nearby, only the Diary, as many sheets as you could want in the Diary, they tempted me...

But I resisted.

I buttoned myself up and went home.

On the Light Brown Planet, the two-legged creatures had reached a historical conclusion:

Imitation leads to survival.

The child began to imitate its parents in all their actions at an early age, and thus learned to sow, reap, and hunt, to build straw huts and to bake clay jars.

Tradition had only one single drawback—the young people got so caught up in imitation that they ended up doing what their creators had done before them: they died.

To correct this mistake, a whirlwind development of science began, but somewhere along the way of its rise, this goal was forgotten. Civilization created great thinkers, and they, following tradition, scientifically proved that a prosperous population should imitate its very first creator—the Big Bang.

Thus, over the centuries, they began to invent small explosions, which they quickly perfected—from bamboo filled with gunpowder to the neutron bomb. And they would continue to perfect them until the day when there would be no one to draw the historical conclusion: Imitation leads to destruction.

Georgi GOSPODINOV

Death and the Gardener

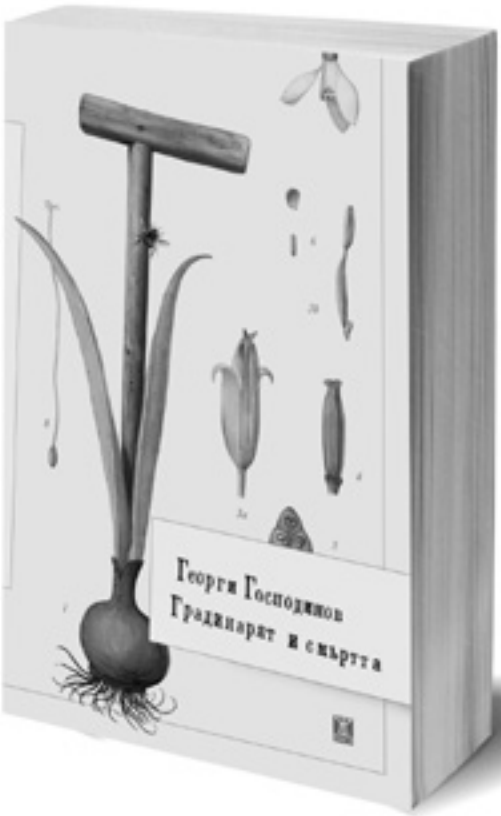
Georgi Gospodinov (1968) is the International Booker Prize winning author of *Time Shelter*. That novel has been published in more than 35 languages. Gospodinov first gained international prominence with his previous novels, *Natural Novel* and *Physics of Sorrow*. He is the winner of the Premio Strega Europeo (2021), the Usedom Prize for European literature (2021), The Central European Angelus Award (2019), The Jan Michalski Prize (2016), etc. Recently his poetry books received Le Prix Mallarmé in France and Premio Internazionale NordSud in Abruzzo, Italy. Gospodinov is the author of several short story collections: *And Other Stories*, *And All Turned Moon*, and *All Our Bodies*. His body of work also includes poetry, nonfiction, plays, a graphic novel *The Eternal Fly*, etc.

His most recent book, *Death and the Gardener* (2024), is dedicated to his father and to "the botany of sorrow." It has already been translated into English, German, French, Spanish, and other languages. The German edition was selected as the Book of the Month for August 2025 by Austrian television and radio. The English edition (translated by Angela Rodel) was the *Guardian*'s Book of the Day, as well as the *Financial Times*' Book of the Week. The Spanish edition (translated by María Vutova) spent

ten weeks in the top five bestsellers list. Reviews of the book have appeared in publications such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *TLS*, *El Mundo*, *Le Monde*, and others.

Georgi Gospodinov lives and works in Sofia.

Novel, 216 pages
ISBN: 9786191869121
Janet 45 Publishing House, 2024



About the book

"My father was a gardener. Now he is a garden."

Death and the Gardener traces the final month of a father's life, a dying father in a dying world. His son Georgi, the narrator, reports both radically and gently from those end times. The novel unfolds also as a history of the father's generation— born in Bulgaria at the end of the WWII, "often absent, clinging to the snorkel of a cigarette, swimming in different waters and clouds." What kept the old man down to earth was his garden, turning after his departure into a place of ultimate loss but also of consolation where he would live on in the first tulips of spring. With striking acuity, Gospodinov explores the peculiar reality of taming grief through storytelling. Masterfully translated by Angela Rodel, this is another profoundly moving novel from "one of the indispensable writers of our times" (International Booker Prize Jury).

1

My father was a gardener. Now he's a garden.

I don't know where to begin. Let that be the beginning.

Yes, we're talking about an end, of course, but where does the end begin?

I think I wet myself, my father said on the threshold. He was standing in the frame of the front door, painfully thin, slightly hunched, with that slouch typical of tall people. He had been driven to Sofia late in the evening at the very end of November. He had travelled three hundred kilometres in the back seat, lying down, to dull the pain. I had managed to make an appointment for medical tests the next day.

I wet myself, he said again, guilty like a child, apologetic and with that characteristic self-irony of his, *I've become a laughing stock in my old age*.

Everything's fine, I said, and we set about changing his clothes in the hallway, shutting the door to the living room.

I'm afraid, my daughter whispered into my ear at one point. Looking back now, I realise she was the first to sense it. I still didn't know, I didn't want to know.

*

Let me say right away that at the end of this book, the main character dies. Actually, not even at the end, but in the middle, although he will come alive again after that point in all the stories I will tell about him. Because, as Gaustine always says, in the past, time does not flow in a single direction.

When I was little, I would choose only books written in the first person from the library, because I knew that the main character wouldn't die in them.

OK, fine, this book is written in the first person, even though it's real main character does die.

Only the storytellers survive, but they, too, will die one day.

Only the stories survive.

And the garden, which my father had planted before he died.

Surely this is why we tell stories. To create another parallel corridor where the world and everything in it are in their rightful places. To divert the story down another furrow when danger and death flood in, just as he would divert the water into another row in his garden.

I would like there to be light, soft afternoon light in these pages. This is not a book about death, but rather about sorrow for a life that is ending. There's a difference. Sorrow not just for the honeycomb full of honey, but an even greater sorrow for the empty cells within it. Sorrow for that honeycomb, which the wax candles also remember, while they burn down in our hands. *Nothing to fear*, as he always liked to say.

2

The notebook I'm now writing in (I've been writing in notebooks for thirty years) was begun in October, in all innocence. He was already in pain. The signs were there, in plain sight, only the decoding came too late. I was heading off somewhere again. This time for Cracow or Frankfurt, I can't remember.

OK, but when you get back, come visit for a bit, so you can rest for a few days.

It was a monstrously intense year with countless trips. *Come visit for a bit, so you can rest* . . . I didn't pay much attention back then. He was always grumbling that we didn't visit often enough, that we didn't give ourselves any breaks. Now I read something new into those words. *Come visit for a bit*, I heard, *and stay with me, so we can spend some time together; I won't be here for much longer, I don't know whether I' ll last the winter*.

That very October, when we saw each other for one day, shortly before I took off, standing next to the last roses of autumn:

You know, I've been having some funny pains in my lower back.

Your lower back?

And they're kind of creeping upwards. Up to where?

Up to my shoulders. And my chest feels tight . . .

He'd gone to the doctor in the nearby town. They'd given him some pills. Whose lower back doesn't hurt these days, especially with all that working in the garden? At first, the pills helped.

I had one final trip to Portugal and then nothing for the rest of the year.

How are you, hanging in there?

Nothing to fear, he said. 'Nothing to fear' was his favour- ite phrase. His ready answer to every question.

Is your lower back really hurting? Nothing to fear.

You look like you've lost weight. Nothing to fear.

But then—I only notice it now when replaying that October over and over in my head—when we hugged goodbye, before I got in the car, he said something else.

Nothing to fear, I'll wait for you to get back.

Did I notice it then? Yes and no.

At seventy-nine he took care of a huge garden with vege- tables, fruit trees and flowers. It had everything: tomatoes, peppers, potatoes, corn, strawberries, peonies, roses, tulips, trees. Planting, weeding, watering, hoeing, spraying, staking... We had already agreed he should stop, or at least ease up a little. I remember that then, next to those last October roses, the light purple ones, I had again told him that if he kept working in the garden like this and didn't go to the doctor he'd simply collapse all of a sudden and the garden would go to seed before his eyes. It's strange which words fate (or whatever we call that thing hidden in the future) lets into its ears. From the point of view of today, I see all the retrospective cruelty in my comment.

3

I knew that this garden was special. It had saved his life after the first cancer, it had given him seventeen years, but it would also be the death of him. It grew out of nothing in the empty yard of a village house my brother bought. *Here's where I feel my best*, he would always say. The rounds of chemo and radiation therapy had helped him, but they had also taken their toll. He never recovered his old laugh, his cheerful high spirits. He would sit in silence for long stretches, occasionally shaking his head in some soundless monologue of his own.

The garden was his other possible life, the voice unused and everything left unsaid. He would speak through it, and his words were apples, cherries, big red tomatoes. The first thing he'd do when I arrived would be to show me around. It was different every time.

I liked being there, especially in spring, burying my head amid the branches of a heavily blossoming plum tree, closing my eyes and listening to the buzzing Zen of the bees. Other times I secretly hated it, watching my father swinging his hoe, thin, stripped to the waist, revealing the scars left by operations on his sliced-

up body. He and the garden became one, he wouldn't leave it, but now it, too, refused to let him go. There was some strange fatal connection, some Faustian deal, between them. I imagined it slowly sucking away his strength, feeding the fruit and roses within it—the rosier the cherries, tulips and tomatoes grew, the paler he became.

My father managed to turn every place into a garden, every house into a home. This is a particular skill. Every rented apartment we ever moved into, and we moved a lot, who knows why, always somehow became our home. For this reason now, on top of everything else, I feel homeless. I will never forget how he even managed to transport his garden with us. He would carefully dig up the hyacinth, narcissus and toadflax bulbs, the peonies and tulips—his favourite dark-blue tulips from Holland—which he refused to part with and would replant in the garden at each new place. I wonder whether flowers aren't covert assistants to the dead who lie beneath them, observing the world through the periscope of their stems.

Yes, my father was a gardener. Now he is a garden.

4

What do we talk about when we talk about death? Are we talking about the person who is absent, or about ourselves? Or are we talking about absence itself? He is so completely not here that every free minute is filled with his absence.

His presence until now also reconfirmed my own presence, the presence of my childhood. Conversely, his absence sets into motion the whole machinery of memory. Things I haven't thought about in a long time are now awakening, I awaken them, so as to be sure that all of it ever existed. Voluntary and involuntary memory work together to turn the clogged mechanism of recollection, conjuring and clarifying images not clearly seen before. We must admit that this work is as much focused on the memory of the departed one as it is on us. This is the somewhat egotistical work of saving our own selves, making sense of our own remaining after someone has left.

Do we still exist if the last person who remembers us as children has passed away?

What do we talk about when we talk about death? About life, of course, about its whole enchanting ephemerality.

5

I call from Lisbon, noise all around me. The film festival is in full swing, and I'm on the jury, rushing from film to film. I call when there's a break between two films. *Dad, how's your back? It's fine, no big deal. I call my mother. Mom, how's Dad? Well, he's fine, just lying here. I'm rubbing him down with some snake venom. What's this snake venom? Well, one of the nurses' aides said it helps a lot for pain, she gave me a little.*

My father and mother lived through the pandemic. Vaccines, isolation and the village house they lived in saved them. He had already gone through cancer once, my mother had diabetes, the perfect victims for that virus. At the beginning of the pandemic I was again off somewhere else, living in Berlin for a year, so we talked on the phone every day, and I tried to catch every change in their voices: *You sound a little hoarse to me, have you still got your sense of smell, check your oxygen saturation...*

6

It was the end of November when he came to Sofia for tests, with a single duffel bag, a leather jacket and a walking stick. (A leather jacket, and a walking stick whittled by his own hands, this captures him to a tee.) He climbed the four flights of stairs on his own, without stopping, surprising even himself. He had three more climbs left on them (and only two descents), but we didn't know that then. Every time he climbed more slowly, with more difficulty; the last time we took out a chair so he could rest on the landings between floors.

There were sixty-four steps, I counted them in my head. I'm sure he counted them, too.

He had only a hundred and ninety-two steps left to climb.

The next day he would have a radioisotopic scan. That thing where an injected fluid settles into any areas containing "metabolic activity" and *you light up like a Christmas tree*, as one of the doctors put it. I would quickly learn that the phrase "metabolic activity," which sounded innocent enough, in fact most often meant tumour markers or metastases. The diagnosis was written in such a way that the patient could make sense of it if he tried. But if he decided he didn't want to know, he had that option as well.

M. in the left 4th and 9th ribs and in the right 7th rib, ill-defined growths in the liver, changes to the bone structure, degenerative and osteoarthritic changes, increased fixation of radiopharmaceuticals in the spinal column, indications of ill-defined osteolytic lesions. Some of the findings should be fur- ther investigated to rule out the possibility of . . .

Hang in there, a doctor friend of mine tells me as she pores over the test results during a short break while my father goes to the bathroom. I can sense she's trying to find something positive, some ambiguity in the brutally unam- biguous test results. *There are cases*, she says, *in which things stay the same or progress very slowly, plus your dad looks like a hardy guy.*

I drove him home and went out to get something to eat. I wanted to be alone for a bit and to cry like a baby.

But there was nowhere to cry.

Some of the people on the street smiled at me, said hello, recognised me. I turned down the first side street, thank God it was nearly deserted, and there I let the tears flow. I walked to the other end, went back to the start of the street, and again down to the other end, some strange patrolling of grief. I needed to call my brother, but I didn't have the strength. I finally dialled the number, and made it brief—things weren't looking good, they needed to do more tests and that I couldn't talk at the moment—and hung up.

In these patriarchal latitudes they say that when children cry there's nothing to fear, but when adults cry, there really is something to fear. Yet when you're a child and an adult at the same time, and you've just found out that your father is dying . . .

The day was freezing and sunny, people were going out on their lunch breaks for a quick bite, some were walking their dogs, waving, laughing . . . The end of the world doesn't come to each of us at the same time. All of them have fathers who are still alive, I thought to myself. And then the very thought startled me. My father was also still alive.

I'll never forget one afternoon in the early eighties when my next-door neighbour was sobbing loudly in his bath- room. And his crying carried through the little open window and hung above the quiet street. He had surely shut himself up in the bathroom so that no one would hear him, but everyone did. I was ten years old and I knew something irrevocable had happened, and what is more

irrevocable than death? The neighbour had just learned that his granddaughter had died, she was my age. I realised two things that afternoon: that it's not just old people who die, and that it must be very awful to have someone close to you die, if even a grown man can sob in such despair. I was at home alone, and stood petrified. I wondered whether I should go over to the neighbour's. I was afraid he'd harm himself, even though the window was far too small to jump out of, but something else, who knows? I can still hear that forlorn wail, which floated down from above like a muezzin's call in the late afternoon.

7

We bury our parents many times over in our imaginations. That our parents will one day die is surely one of our earliest fears. *As a child I would get up in the middle of the night to check whether my mother was still breathing*, a friend once told me. This instinctive concern a child has for those without whom it would be left on its own—is it a fear for one's parents or for oneself? I'm not sure the distinction exists at that point. It's one and the same fear.

It was my first fear, too, my first recurring nightmare, my first reason to write. The dream that stalked me was simple and devastating. My father, mother and brother were all at the bottom of the village well and they would never come out. I was outside, safe but alone. Here lay my double fear: for them, and as strange as it might sound, for me, since they had abandoned me. *Why aren't we together, even if at the bottom of a well?* I must have been six or seven. I immediately wanted to tell my grandma, whom I lived with at the time, about this nightmare. But she stopped me with a finger to her lips—I must stay silent, because telling such dreams out loud makes them come true; *they fill up with blood*, as she put it. But the dream kept recurring until I couldn't stay silent any longer. So I decided to write it down. I secretly tore a page out of a notebook (I knew that writing starts from sin), and using the letters I had just learned from my grandfather I somehow managed to crookedly transcribe my dream. I've told this story before. I never had that dream again. But I've also never forgotten it. That was the price.

I sense that this nightmare, put off for fifty years, has now, with my father's death, slowly begun to fill with blood.

Writing this, I suddenly remember that my father really did go down into the well. And at exactly the time the nightmare started plaguing me. Strange, I've gone back to that dream many times, but only now has the specific incident resurfaced.

Yes, my father had to climb down into that very well to take out the pump, which was always breaking. The well was about fourteen metres deep, while the pump hung at the twelfth metre. I would stand nearby, full of fear for my father. Look, now they're tying the rope around him, tightening it around his waist and over his shoulders, he's climbing up on the rim of the wellhead. The other men are bustling around. (Why don't any of the others go down, why him of all people?) The rope is wound around the winch of the well. My father grasps the stone rim, yells *nothing to fear* (that very same *nothing to fear* he says even now, in his final days) and sinks into the darkness. The winch slowly starts to unwind, creaking horribly, which only feeds my fear. What if it can't hold his weight and breaks, my father is enormous, I imagine his body falling heavily downwards, my imagination is terrible, one, two, three metres down into the cold and dark. *Let 'er out, let 'er out*, I hear his voice as if through a funnel, *nothing to fear, let 'er out... stoooop.* My body is already frozen in terror, I count silently in my head. Why haven't they pulled him out yet, pull him out, pull him out . . .

Ready? the men up above yell. Aha, now you're asking, but you were all too chicken to go down there yourselves. Two terrible seconds until his answer comes. *I unhooked it, the piece of shit... Pull me up...* And the winch starts creaking again, one, two, three rotations and my father still isn't out, twelve metres is a long time, just a little more, a little more, and his curly black hair appears over the edge of the wellhead, covered in spiderwebs and bluish dust. He's alive.

Fifty years later they would once again lower my father down with ropes. This time only two metres. And once again I would be afraid they would drop him, as they lurched to one side and then straightened out again, four men whose job this is. I am six again and fifty-six all at once, but this time I have no hope.

Photo: Yana Lozeva

Tea *M*ONEVA

Mandarins on Marienplatz

Tea Moneva was born in 1994 in Varna, Bulgaria. When she was 19, she moved to Germany to study Pharmacy at the Ludwig-Maximilian University of Munich.

Her life between two cultures—Bulgarian and German—shapes her creative vision and is the throughline of her writing. She is drawn to themes like identity in a globalized world; whether one can adopt a foreign country and make it into a second homeland; the meaning of life and how fully we exist; and whether it is possible to live without killing antsor dreams. She does not fully belong to any single city, and yet feels almost every place as a borrowed home.

She is the author of two books: the poetry collection *Translator of the World* (Janet 45, 2021), which won an honorable mention in the national Southern Spring literary competition, and the novel *Mandarins on Marienplatz* (Janet 45, 2024), nominated for the 13 Centuries of Bulgaria Novel of the Year Award.

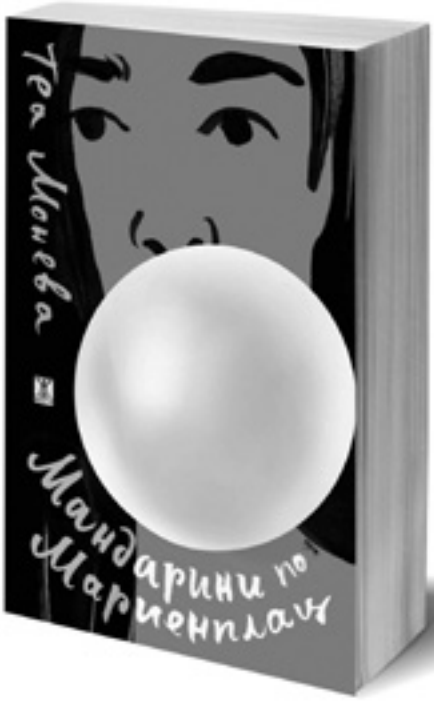
Her work has been published in Bulgarian literary journals and periodicals and has won numerous national literary prizes. Some of her poems have been translated into Spanish. Since early 2025, she has been living in Bulgaria again, working in the field of clinical research.

She considers herself above all a writer: a Bulgarian, but also a German, a child of Europe. She's forever looking for the pill for eternal youth. She dreams of piecing together the fragments of the world into a single whole.

About the book

Is it possible to adopt a foreign country and make it your homeland? How do we come to understand who we are, and which path is ours? Do insects dream up the world we live in?

Mandarins on Marienplatz is a deeply poetic novel about the pain of growing up, inner growth, and cultural layering. It follows Nia, a nineteen-year-old Bulgarian who moves to Munich to study pharmacology and soon begins searching not only for her vocation but also for her identity. Told in the first person and structured in five parts plus an epilogue, the novel traces her different selves—lived or imagined—each revealing a new stage of her journey.



Germany is a country of unfamiliar habits and perceptions, where the language feels like a barrier and daily life is a labyrinth of obstacles. Nia finds refuge in scribbling thoughts and questions on napkins and scraps of paper: reflections on God, time, identity, even the possibility that insects dream the world into being. Through these fragments, she grows and begins to see life more philosophically, longing not just to be Bulgarian but a child of the world.

Along the way, she meets new figures who unsettle her sense of place—Vesna, a cosmopolitan Balkan

girl; Floris, a German girl who seems free from the laws of gravity; Felix, a poet writing the same poem for years. A brief return to Bulgaria deepens her conflict, as her parents' Balkan sensibilities clash with her new awareness, leaving her grandmother as her only confidante. This part of the novel explores generational gaps, immigrant guilt, the need to be, having left the motherland, happy and successful at any price.

Gradually, Munich transforms from a city of coldness to one she wishes to claim as her own. She studies, quarrels, fails, experiments, and falls in love—with life and with the city itself. Nia and others like her are like mandarins scattered across Marienplatz—uprooted, transformed, no longer entirely themselves.

The novel closes without a definitive choice of path. In the epilogue, after illness and the loss of her cherished napkins, Nia decides to leave for Norway—not in search of answers but with the understanding that there is no single correct road. The only thing that matters, she writes on a half-crumpled napkin, is the desire to be a good person.

Mandarins on Marienplatz is a story for the children of the 1990s—uprooted, raised between worlds, caught between privilege and dislocation. Nia's journey is both personal and generational: a search for home, identity, and belonging in a world without stable borders.

Novel, 236 pages
ISBN: 9786191869084
Janet 45 Publishing House,
2024

Mandarins on Marienplatz

EXCERPT *Translated by Izidora Angel*

1

I pressed my face to the window and imagined how I filled my eyes with the sea, how I let it push against my eyelids until it spilled out and the waves spun around the room, toppled me over and carried me to a new shore. My disappearance from here, that was how my moving away would begin.

I sat on the suitcase and yanked its zippers south, east, north and west, until at last the clothes all settled inside and the zippers finally closed. I did the same with the second suitcase. I could tell they were hurting, the zippers, I could feel them straining to contain the contents.

Dad carried the suitcases down the stairs, I followed behind him, and my mom followed behind me. Not one of us said a word, uttered not a single syllable. Our paltry procession ended when we piled into the car. But the car protested my leaving and refused to start, to accompany me to the airport. We called a taxi instead.

The minutes that followed dissolved into a fog. I recall only the most searing among them, and then the instant I sank into the airplane seat and drew the belt across my lap, it was as if I'd slipped free of myself and hovered above, watching. My eyes melted, streaking my white T-shirt; my hands quivered as though they longed to break away. My nose filled, and I sneezed—precisely seven times. I didn't have a tissue, so for the remainder of the flight I sniffled the same snot. That ritual became a sort of anchor—I was departing my old self, moving into another life, and only the perpetual sniffling still held me in place.

***

The officer at the passport control stared at me with big unblinking blue eyes.

"Documents," he muttered, barely moving his lips. I took out my passport and handed it to him.

"What is the purpose of your visit to Germany?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I don't know."

He rose from his seat inside the booth, adjusted his glasses, and looked me up and down. He had yet to blink. I noticed a giant bar of chocolate on his desk and imagined a little ant, lost and all by itself, desperately looking for a map to find its way inside the grooves of the chocolate squares.

The officer seemed puzzled, as though he was searching for an adequate response to such an answer.

"I'm here to study." I helped him along.

I felt a pang of sadness for him—sitting all day trapped in that box. Tirelessly working, then going home to clean, or cook, or walk around with his vacuum cleaner, then falling asleep in front of the TV.

The officer leaned forward, wished me all the best and handed me back my documents.

"Why didn't you just say so from the start?" he asked.

I walked away without answering or saying goodbye. I'd had enough farewells for one day. Saying goodbye to my parents was painful enough. I didn't need this guy—and the imaginary ant on his chocolate bar—to be added to the list of things I would miss.

I grabbed the two twenty-kilo suitcases off the baggage carousel and started dragging them behind me. The reason they were so heavy was because besides the clothes inside, my mother had also managed to stuff them with a desk lamp, an electric kettle, two plastic plates, a fork, a spoon, a knife, an iron, bedsheets, and a smooth stone from the bottom of the Black Sea. Before I left, she urged me to be brave and unafraid.

The airport felt unwelcoming. Everywhere I looked I saw the covers of magazines featuring people with dumb grins. The corridors were too long, the escalators moved far too slowly. A stranger bumped into me, apologized in English, and kept running.

Below the airport, at the subway platform, I sat on a metal bench and waited for the train into the city. I stuck my gum under the seat. I knew it was wrong, but I'd always wanted to do it.

The train screeched into the station with full force, whipping my hair around. I accidentally kicked one of my suitcases, which simultaneously hurt my foot and forced me to bend down to pick it back up. A few people were already lined up at the doors, waiting calmly—no shoving, no cutting in line. I joined them with my heavy luggage, and stood behind a couple. The boy had his arm around the girl's waist and nibbled her ear.

The doors opened slowly and the line of passengers filed onto the train. There were plenty of empty seats, but the couple chose the ones directly across from me. They held hands and stared out the window. I wanted to chat them up, ask where they were from, but I didn't have the nerve. What would have been the point, anyway? They would tell me they were German, probably from Munich, that they had met at university and had been dating for three months. And I—I would get upset, maybe even cry: Look at me, look at the bags under my eyes, I'm a total mess… You know nothing about me or my world! You were born in Munich, studied in Munich, and soon — you'll be working in Munich!

Instead of shouting this all out, I simply stared at the couple and attempted to forget my parents' caved-in faces as I turned to look back at them one last time before I had to open my backpack, take out my laptop and run it through the security scanner. My parents' faces had been contorted the entire time, the whole world was contorted—I was seeing it through streams of tears. I took off my shoes and slipped on the blue booties. The security officer waved me through. I turned to look at them one more time, then crossed to the other side.

I felt my gaze still stabbing the couple opposite me. Apparently they didn't like it, because the boy stood up, grabbed the girl by the hand, and pulled her after him. Let them leave, I thought, who cares—like they mattered anyway.

If I could, I would've pulled a piece of blue chalk from my pocket and scribbled all over the floor. I would have drawn the sea everywhere, let the train passengers soak their fine shoes in it. I would have added a few seagulls and their cries, to keep the weary travelers from falling asleep. Instead, I tilted my head, half-closed my eyes, and looked upward. The only advantage to being nearsighted is that the sky looks like the sea.

"Marienplatz," the loudspeaker announced. I found myself in the center of springtime Munich, surrounded by warm April sunbeams, unfamiliar streets, vast squares, and ancient buildings. I thought of a wonderful German word—*gasse*. It means a little alley. This city was full of *gassen*. I wandered through them, dragging my suitcases behind me. From time to time I stopped to rest, taking in everything around me. I noticed that in quite a few places in the city center, the tiles were dotted with circles of flattened gum. Most of these dots were black, pressed in by thousands of shoes, inseparable from the alleys and squares. It seemed to me that this was how everyone tried to leave some of themselves in the city, to become part of it.

After about twenty minutes of wandering, I found the hostel where I'd booked my stay. It was wedged between two buildings.

The boy at the reception quickly checked my passport, confirmed my reservation number, and handed me a key.

"The last room behind that door," he pointed to the hallway to the right of the desk. Then he went back to his phone, watching memes and texting with someone.

The room had six beds, six small lockers with padlocks, and two sinks. It was empty — maybe tonight there'd be no one else but me here. I didn't mind. This was the beginning of my independence; I had to get used to being alone. I chose the bed by the window, surrounded it with my luggage, and sat down on the pillow. I hugged my knees and twisted my face into something resembling a smile.

***

I dreamed of a slow summer morning. I dreamed I was a papaya seed and no one could hurt me. I felt warm swimming in all that orange. I was there with the other seeds, my loved ones. Someone split the papaya in two, and I involuntarily slipped downward. I fell onto the table, slid across it, and from there—onto the floor. Far, far away. I missed the warm womb of the papaya, my homeland. A bird snatched me up, maybe a seagull or a pigeon, I don't know. I flew off. There was no way of going back, and nothing would ever be the same again.

I woke up, but not fully—I could still feel the bird's claws on me. I rolled my eyes around the room and stretched in bed. It was quiet, only footsteps echoed in the corridor, cracking open the shells of my sleep. I pushed the sheet aside and stepped onto the cold floor. I slid my earbuds in and turned the volume to the maximum. My phone warned me this was dangerous for my hearing. I told it not to worry about my ears, explained that at the moment there were other, more urgent problems, and went to brush my teeth.

As I was leaving the hostel, I glanced at the boy at reception; he looked like a statue made of stone. I wondered if he'd spent the whole night in that position. He sat with his back hunched and elbows on the desk, his reddened eyes glued to the small phone screen. He didn't pay me the slightest attention.

Near the hostel there was an intersection where, besides a traffic light, there was a newspaper vending machine. I lifted the lid and stuck my hand inside. I took out a newspaper and shut it. There was a gaping slot where the coins were meant to go and above it was the price. I found it funny that the Germans were so naive as to think people would pay of their own free will when no one was looking. Half the population riding the buses in Varna tried every trick in the book to dodge the conductors, and here there was no seller, nothing. You put

in coins only if you decided it was necessary. I walked down the street with the stolen newspaper, but after a few steps my cursed conscience spoke up and I went back to pay for it.

I went into a nearby café and sat at the table by the door. For a while I watched the pedestrians hurrying off to work. I've always been puzzled by this universal rushing, a city's nervous awakening. The traffic light was never alone for long, cars continuously sped past it. From time to time bicycles went by too, ridden by women in heels and skirts. A wild sight. At the far end of the street, a tram rumbled past every few minutes. It was bound to its tracks, unable to change course, rushing toward the same final stop.

***

A few napkins rested on my table. I took the top one. It was nice; if I wanted to, I could fold it into a rose. It would turn out very beautiful—fully blossomed and with a long stem and leaves. I wouldn't give it thorns. Sometimes no thorns is better.

But instead of making flowers, I just looked at the napkin. I told it how I felt, but it didn't understand me. How could it? Aren't napkins just napkins after all?

I folded one of its corners, then the other. We both knew it wasn't true. Sometimes a napkin that can understand you best of all. It can read your feelings—or to let you write them inside it.

So I confided in it:

I dream
to be as mighty as the sea,
to come upon my own ship.

***

The chocolate biscuit had sprayed the foam around itself and bravely sailed the surface of the cappuccino. I tore open three packets of sugar and poured them close to the biscuit. I thought all that sweetness would drive away the misfortune, the homesickness, any and all doubts about one's bright future.

The newspaper lay waiting, spread out across the table, taking up all the space. I buried my face in its tiny letters.

I underlined the apartment ads, and if I came upon a word I didn't know, I looked it up on my phone. This process was very important, and it was crucial that

it be successful because I hadn't yet found an apartment online and I definitely did not want to end up homeless.

It was not that easy, though. I'd found just one studio apartment. Everything else was too big and expensive. I dialed the number listed in the ad.

"Hello, I'm calling about…"

"It's taken," a voice cut me off.

"But I saw the ad in today's paper…"

"It's taken."

The voice hung up. I shrugged; if only I'd gotten up earlier, maybe I'd be the one living in that apartment right now. I got mad at myself and rewound my day. If only I hadn't stopped at the traffic light to watch the pedestrians and the sky, if only I hadn't left a coin on the tram tracks so I could watch it get flattened, if only I hadn't gone back to pay for the newspaper, if only I hadn't argued with my headphones, if only, if only, if only…

***

I left the café and headed for my next stop. After a few blocks, the smell of fresh pastries drew me to a bakery. I got in the line outside and bought a butter pretzel. I had barely bitten into the soft bread when two pigeons landed nearby. They aimed their little eyes at me like cameras.

"We have pigeons at home too," I told them. "But besides pigeons, we also have seagulls. Do you know what sort of creatures seagulls are?"

The pigeons stayed mute and pecked at the scattered crumbs.

"Sometimes seagulls eat pigeons. I think you should be aware of that. Don't worry, though, it happens rarely, only when there are no more *banichki*—the Bulgarian answer to butter pretzels—left to steal," and to spare them the anxiety, I added, "but there are *always* more banichki to steal."

I wondered whether I should repeat what I just told the pigeons but in German; they were German pigeons, after all, maybe they hadn't fully understood me. I tossed them the rest of the pretzel—at least that they understood—bowed to them, and walked on.

I wandered along the sidewalks of Leopoldstrasse, where tall poplars stood between the paths and bike lanes, their tops seeming to begin from the sky itself. In the gardens outside restaurants, artists had lined up their paintings for sale, and here and there people had set their libraries out on benches. Their books weren't expensive, just a euro or two apiece. All these random people on the

street reminded me of home and of the old men from the neighborhood who also went out to sell their books so they could scrape some change together for brandy or bread. But I found one essential difference—the eyes. People's eyes were different here. I had never seen so many light-colored eyes in one place. Perhaps the difference also lay in the arrangement of the iris, in its mottling and the black specks scattered across it. The pupils were tiny, which freed the blue in the iris. I stared into them.

In turn, they seemed to try to imprint me onto their eyes' surface. I was dark, foreign. Everything about me exposed my different origin, everything gave me away—my skin, my hair, most of all my dark, almost black eyes.

I reached the cafeteria; at its entrance there were several columns plastered with apartment ads. Again I spotted just one that could work. This time, the voice on the other end of the line sounded friendlier. This was going to be the place, I knew it. We would get on, become as close as brother and sister, and just like that I would have found my friends and family here in Munich.

"I'm calling about the room."

"Aren't you a girl?" the voice laughed.

"Uh, yes. So what?"

"Didn't you read the ad? I'm looking for a male roommate. No exceptions."

I hung up, jabbing the phone's red button a couple of extra times, then headed to the nearest bathroom, entered the first stall, and crouched on the floor. It smelled awful and toilet paper was scattered everywhere. I closed my eyes and tried to think of the sea. I remembered swimming among at least a hundred jellyfish, and as I dove around them, I felt their slimy caps. The sun pierced its rays through the water and lit up my hands and their tentacles; for a few fleeting seconds everything around me seemed to glow, then I came up for air.

Someone in the next stall over flushed, zipped up, and left. That brought me crashing down directly before the majesty of the toilet bowl. I opened my eyes, saw the toilet brush, and burst into tears. Oh, just what I needed. I hate girls who cry. Crybabies. Bravo, Nia, you're killing it at life.

***

The house looked as if it were made of sugar and chocolate biscuits. It stood at the end of the street nestled among a few pine trees. It had no balconies, only windows on each of the three floors, the kind so small you could barely slip your gaze through them. Up on the roof there were tiles missing. A bench sat in front

of the house, and propped against it, was a red umbrella. I thought how lovely it would be to sit here and sketch this house with its missing roof tiles and its flower-filled yard.

A girl with freckles and red hair paced back and forth by the fence. She wore a denim jacket and had a large backpack.

"Hello," I said to her.

"Hello."

"Here for the room?"

"Yes."

We stood a while longer, looking at each other.

"Why are you waiting out here, in front?" I asked.

"Well, I don't know. It feels a little creepy."

"How so?"

"It's just so eerily quiet, all the curtains are drawn, and the man on the phone sounded strange."

The freckled one seemed uneasy, but I had pepper spray. I showed it to her, and it calmed her nerves.

"Let's go in then," she said.

We rang the bell and waited. A tall man with glasses, graying hair, and a big beer gut appeared at the door. He flashed a wide smile.

"Come in, we'll start with the kitchen," he waved us inside. "How old are you?"

"I'm nineteen," I said.

The man led us into a small room with a stove, a sink, and a refrigerator in one corner, and a table with a sofa in the other. The walls were painted gray, and the light from the windows barely filtered through the heavy dark-red curtains. In the sink, a tower of unwashed dishes leaned precariously, with a few flies circling above it.

"You can cook here, but you can't sit at the table. That's only for me. My personal corner, you understand?" He didn't wait for a reply. "Come this way."

We climbed the stairs to the second floor. The landlord flicked on a light just long enough for us to pass and hurried to switch it off again.

"I care about the environment," he explained. "Go on, don't be shy, have a look around."

He showed us the laundry room down in the basement, then some old cupboards filled with vacuum cleaners, took us into one of the bathrooms. There were three in the house, one on each floor, but he said it was preferable that we only used the bathroom on our own floor.

"The bathrooms are almost *too* clean," said the freckled girl.

I nodded—she was right, this house had nothing to do with chocolate. A shiver ran through me, and I shoved my hand into my pocket, gripping the pepper spray. I wanted us out of there as quickly as possible. I noticed how long the man's eyes lingered on the freckled girl's décolleté when she wasn't looking. I motioned to her to cover herself.

We came to one of the rooms available for rent. The landlord explained that an elderly woman was living there now. She had covered parts of the room with plastic so as not to damage any of the surfaces. The freckled girl tried to open the wardrobe, but he immediately stopped her.

"That's personal property. You can't go through the woman's things."

A blue vein appeared on his forehead, winding toward his eyes.

"Um, excuse me," I said, "but could I meet one of the other girls?"

"Yes, of course, they're here, but they're studying right now, and it wouldn't be right to disturb them."

The man laughed, then looked me up and down and stroked his enormous gut.

I tugged the freckled girl by the sleeve. "We're leaving."

"If you like, I have two free rooms—they could both be yours. Just say the word and I'll bring the papers."

"We'll think about it."

"This is Munich. If not you, someone else will take the rooms. You'd better decide quickly," he pressed.

"We'll look around the neighborhood and come right back," I lied.

"Stay a little longer, I need to show you the garage. We have a nice, spacious garage."

To the left of the bench in front of the house, a path led toward the garage. Its door gaped open, but you couldn't see what was inside. I had no breadcrumbs in my pocket to scatter and mark the way back.

I glanced at the man. His fingers were covered in hair, his skin greasy.

"We'll see the garage later, but first I need to talk to my mother," I whispered. "I can't decide on the room before I speak with her. Will you come with me?"

I looked at the freckled girl. She nodded. She slipped her arm through mine and we walked toward the gate at the end of the yard. We didn't let go of each other all the way to the bus stop, never once looking back. We held on until we reached the city center, where we finally had to part. We didn't speak, just hugged, and each of us went her own way. As I walked back to the hostel, her freckles kept dancing before me.

Photo: Tom Langdon

Aziz TASH

The Low Flight Above Words

Aziz Nazmi Shakir (better known by his pen name Aziz Tash) was born in Smolyan, where he graduated from the Ivan Vazov Language High School with a degree in English language teaching. He then studied Arabic and Turkish language and literature at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski (1992–1997). From 1999 to 2004, he was a doctoral student in the history of science at Istanbul University. He worked as a university lecturer in Istanbul for more than twenty years, after which he returned permanently to Sofia, where he was initially appointed to the Department of Mediterranean and Eastern Studies at New Bulgarian University (2021–2023) and then as a researcher in the Department of Arabic and Semitic Studies at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. He publishes his own poetry, prose, and essays in Bulgarian and Turkish, as well as translations from Turkish, Arabic, English, and Russian. His works have been translated into English, Croatian, Hungarian, Arabic, Russian, Turkish, and Malay.

In 2007, he was invited to the 40th edition of the oldest international writers' program in the United States (known as the International Writing Program). He participates as a mentor in creative writing seminars at the Zaeshka Dupka Writers' Academy (2021–2025). He is a member of the Union of Translators in Bulgaria, in the "Translation of Fiction" section.

About the book

The narrative, which unfolds from 2017 to 2025, is told from the perspective of two main characters—Lydia and Nazmi, both born in the 1970s, whose voices form a kind of "braid" in the fabric of the text, alternating between solo and duet (in dialogues) female and male performances. University lecturer Nazmi literally dives into the novel through the hatch of a hypobaric oxygen chamber, in which his non-verbal five-year-old son Onur is about to breathe compressed oxygen—yet another therapy that the desperate father is trying, so as to get Onur, diagnosed with a severe form of autism, to say at least "mama"—a second caring parent, remaining behind the scenes, who definitely deserves to hear this address. When Lydia speaks in the text, she is with her six-year-old son Ville who has a phenomenal mathematical memory at Zaventem Airport in Brussels, where she has spent the last few years as the wife of a diplomat, whom she is now fleeing from to her native Sofia. She and Ville have been "diving" for years, and on their latest visit to the hypobaric oxygen chamber in Sofia, they find themselves there with the pair of "amateurs," Nazmi and Onur. This meeting takes place immediately after Nazmi and Lydia's initial self-introductions and marks a turning point of the plot—a subtle thread is woven between the poet father and the early childhood development specialist mother, but in the following weeks, fueled by a nightly virtual dialogue on the Facebook Messenger app, the fates of the two main characters begin to entangle into a common ball that gains ever more furious speed, pushing the action towards its climax. The virtual dialogue, fueled by the fact that Nazmi works in Turkey and his week is divided between Istanbul and Sofia, along with the generation of increasingly unequivocal feelings towards Lydia, turns into a live meeting. Lydia, who until now has admired Nazmi's literary talent, sense of humor, and parental stoicism, makes a startling discovery—he is obsessed with various conspiracy theories and is on the verge of losing touch with reality. Meanwhile, she finds herself entangled in a complex intrigue—her colleague Dr. Mirela Keleva from the Center for Early Childhood Development, which Lydia created and has been running since her return from Brussels, names her as the person directly responsible for an incident involving a child whose parents Lydia consulted. Drago, a likeable lab technician of Roma origin, and hyperbaric therapist Aylin come to her aid, exposing Dr. Keleva's financial improprieties, with the involvement of laboratories subordinate to the pharmaceutical company Pharma-Ced — the Bulgarian incarnation of the global "Big Pharma." It turns out that the latter's interests are directly affected by the Center's activities, and Lydia begins to receive threats against her life and that of

her son. On this new front, where she has to fight under conditions of constant stress, Nazmi is absent. He is fighting another battle, which continues throughout all phases of the plot—until its very conclusion—and forms a completely separate storyline within the novel—about the mental survival of the parent of a child with special needs, in a state of constant mental anguish, questioning the reasons that led to his condition. Are the methods of treatment directly related to the presence or absence of morality in the actions of the parents, and to what extent are they able and entitled to try to change the harsh but presumably fair sentence handed down from Above—"autism"? On the other hand, Nazmi perceives Lydia's appearance in his life as a miracle, giving him the opportunity to find both the right path to his son's speech and forgiveness for the evil that he has been the conduit for, willingly or unwillingly, throughout all stages of his life. The huge differences between Lydia and Nazmi and those between Ville and Onur demonstrate how broad and diverse the spectrum is for both children and their parents.

Although the action is not driven by the autistic characters themselves, it is constructed primarily in their name, and logically, the plot contains few descriptions of their "infuriating" or awe-inspiring behavior, which usually creates discomfort for the parental staff serving them, but is also a litmus test for the maturity of those around them in the form of random "bystanders" on the street, in a restaurant, or on the subway. It is among such people that the novel expects to find its best readers, who will not only learn the meaning of terms such as "dives" and "low flight," but will also realize how valuable the words we take as a given are. And how do you build a bridge between two worlds when the words to connect them are missing? The life stories of the characters and their special children reveal smaller and larger victories based on real events and challenges that can be a support for other destinies and a sign of attention — children on the path in a world that should not only stop to give them priority, but also find a way to stop making them sick.

All issues concerning early childhood development and healthy eating discussed in the novel have been consulted with certified specialists, which makes it a text with a mission that goes beyond the purely artistic needs of readers, without compromising its literary merits.

The Low Flight Above Words

(A book that doesn't care if you like it by AZIZ TASH,
who wouldn't mind if you liked it)

E X C E R P T *Translated by Gergana Galabova*

Important note: All issues concerning early childhood development discussed in this book have been consulted with certified specialists. The checklist in the appendix at the end of the book is intended for parents and guardians of children aged 0 to 6.

To all the crazy parents of autistic children... To everyone else…

The word of the Lord came to me, saying: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I set you apart… "Alas, Sovereign Lord," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am too young."... Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I have put my words in your mouth." (Jeremiah 1:4-9)

"He created man and taught him speech." (Quran: 55:3-4)

"My Lord, put my heart at peace for me and ease my task for me, and untie the knot from my tongue, so they can understand my speech." (Quran, 20:25-28)

Chapter One

HE

All words weigh heavy when a child uses them to tell how digits buried in the sky lose weight. Three multiplied by five ascents with a barochamber equals fifteen infinities of "low flights" above words, heavy as anchors of mercury and cadmium, which it will lift with its paperback boats...

The hatch of the barochamber, shaped like an ancient submarine, slammed shut behind Nazmi's bent spine like the door of a death row prison cell, and even before he had taken a step forward into the narrow cylindrical space, the claustrophobia that seemed to have been waiting for its nail polish to dry squeezed his Adam's apple, as if taking revenge for the original sin. He knew how to control it, but first he had to put the oxygen mask on his five-year-old

son, who had long since settled on the short side of the Pi-shaped sofa and was eagerly flapping his wings. "Like a penguin, doomed never to touch the sky." The last comparison occurred to him just as Aylin, a medical student in her final year, turned the tap to increase the pressure in the barochamber from one to two atmospheres. This meant that for the next hour, the sky here would be twice as heavy, and this weight would stick to everything and pull his thoughts toward the ground with even greater force. He still couldn't find an explanation for why one of the most unpleasant side effects of oxygen "dives" in the pressure chamber for children with an unspecified diagnosis, whom the medical profession more easily accepts as "autistic," is called "low flight." Was it related to most parents' fear that their expectations would once again be shattered before the oxygen-filled plane could fly over the rocks frozen by inarticulate speech? While the second sky burst in noisily through the tap protruding from the ceiling like a camel galloping through the eye of a needle, he quickly connected the mask to one of the half-dozen tubes sticking out of the holes in the bottom of the sofa, from which came the snake-like hiss of 100 percent oxygen. Then, so as not to waste a single atom of the precious gas, he hastily secured the mask to the tiny blond head. Just when he thought he could turn his attention to his fear of enclosed spaces, the child pressed his tiny ears with his hands, forgetting temporarily that they were not wings, and screamed. This wasn't the first time it had happened—the compression caused ears to pop, and often the difference in pressure before and after the procedure created discomfort for the child, who couldn't care less about his father's claustrophobia. He started talking to his son and, realizing that this did nothing to ease the pain in his ears, forced himself to sing. His repertoire mainly included songs such as "A Grasshopper Sat on the Grass" and "Chunga-Changa" which he remembered from his Russian language classes at school, and the Turkish lullaby "Dandini, Dandini, Dastana," which he had learned from the Russian YouTube animated series "World Lullabies" and if those didn't help, despite his obvious lack of singing talent, he would sing all the songs he knew in all kinds of styles, including those whose lyrics were full of holes like Swiss cheese... Russian was definitely first in line, and he thought fondly of his language teachers, who, if they could hear him, would surely be proud. This time, the absurd death of the grasshopper, eaten at the end of the song by a frog with a greedy belly, who magnanimously does not bother the beetles and befriends the flies, managed to calm Onur down, and Nazmi brought out the smaller guns — a palm-sized book, recently purchased at a bargain price, onto which the child began to place first his left and then his right hand. This scene brought to the

father's mind another scene — from the movie *Total Recall*. At the very end, Arnold Schwarzenegger puts his paw into a mold specially cast for the occasion by Hollywood aliens, which looks exactly like the cookie cutters Nazmi's mother had, and activates some kind of mega-reactor, and just before his eyes and lungs explode from the vacuum, Mars gets a brand new atmosphere and everyone in the theatre breathes a sigh of relief, as if they too had been waiting a minute and a half for the air from the screen to rush in and save not only the inhabitants of the colonies inhabiting the Red Planet, but also themselves. Whenever Onur, irritated by something unknown, pulls the oxygen tube out of his mask, a heavy hand like a guillotine rushes to put it back in place, as if the two are surrounded by a vacuum and will suffocate at any moment. Why did the highly advanced aliens deprive an entire planet of its atmosphere for an unknown period of time? What if a hero with more modest biceps had experienced the total recall, perhaps they would still be wondering whether there was life on their neighbors' planet?

Nazmi knew perfectly well that there was no life on Mars, but now his thoughts on the subject had abruptly shifted to something else—he felt the claws of claustrophobia digging into his jugular vein and a thin stream of blood running down his neck. There was no time to lose! Before he died from blood loss, he finally managed to reach for the blank sheet of paper in the chamber and wrote, "ONLY THERE AM I MYSELF". The manicure, which had broken off in his throat, fell away and clung to the sheet of paper. Once again, he had narrowly escaped death. He took a deep breath from the double sky and in the next few minutes wrote his latest poem in the barochamber:

At the scene of the crime
you outline my corpse with your manicure
and beneath me the sheets
blush with shame
and whisper to me:
"Lazarus, rise!"
I mustn't!
I am at the scene of the crime,
I am in you.

The barochamber was one of his many crime scenes. When you think about it, one's entire life, starting from the womb, is a crime scene, which follows its owner closely like an Afghan hound. Even after the master is buried, the hound, loyal to him, will continue to lie on his grave. Perhaps that is why some people prefer to have their ashes scattered—a last attempt to erase the traces of the

final crime scene, or perhaps they are also driven by the claustrophobia they developed in the months before their birth. For Nazmi, it remained a mystery which of the two phobias affected him more strongly. The fear of the unknown, which, with his mother's first contractions, was triggered like a time bomb, or the fear of enclosed spaces. Perhaps this competition and indecision, which would later become a defining trait of his character, had prompted him to be born two weeks late and thus continue to hang like a milestone around his mother's neck. But there was another serious reason for him to perceive the "submarine" as both a crime scene and a prison cell—since Onur was obviously not to blame for the heavy metals in his body and the developmental problems they caused, the blame had to lie with his father and mother. It seemed logical that this guilt should be shared equally between them, but at least for himself, Nazmi had no illusions—it was clear that this was not a simple mathematical calculation. According to the complex calculus, each parent was fully responsible for their son's condition. Indirectly, of course, since they had not injected him with the inexplicably high doses of mercury, lead, and aluminium that his blood and hair tests had detected. In fact, if Nazmi's Y chromosome had not been so presumptuous and had yielded its place to the more demure X chromosome like a true gentleman, he would have had a daughter, who would have been much less likely to develop the "condition"... The idea that this was one of the endless trials from Above, sent almost as a form of a blessing, providing an ideal opportunity to increase our chances of a one-way ticket to heaven, was also tempting. He would have believed it if it had happened to him twenty, fifteen, ten, or even five years ago, but at that moment, the geometric progression of his good relationship with God was approaching zero, not only in numbers and words, but also in spirit. It wasn't that he had doubts about God's existence; on the contrary, such a thought had not tormented him for decades. The problem was that he was becoming increasingly aware of the situation not as a "classic" type of trial, but as a form of retribution during his lifetime, a consequence of his unsatisfactory behavior in life. This in and of itself was not enough to move him—he had become so numb to everything around him lately—but the thought that it was not he, but his child who was experiencing a physical and bodily tragedy, which, due to the chaos in his brain and gut neurons, he could not even comprehend, dripped at regular intervals onto Nazmi's scalp, like water torture. This method, used by the Inquisition but attributed by humane Europeans to the barbaric Chinese, was said to lead to the most agonizing death because with each successive drop, the world collapses again and again. When he first read about this method, the concept that God recreates

existence over and over again in every successive moment to ensure its continuity came to his mind. This was probably a form of protection for everything that exists against the encroachments by various mere mortals, for whom the world collapses every time they think they have discovered (or even worse, that they themselves are) a virus in the hologram provided to them for personal use by the Chief Programmer. In more contemporary terms, there was a kind of non-stop update and backup of the divine database going on everywhere. It occurred to him that today's popular expressions would have sounded incomprehensible even to the students in English class back when he was studying at the language high school, and he realized that everything said and written now would probably soon turn out to be just as incomprehensible, because time had sped up, as if the pyramids, which he alone feared, had chased him down and bombarded him with millennia. Perhaps the way to counteract this rushing, at least minimally, was for everyone to wind back their given time more often, or at least not keep pace with it. There—he had come up with an excuse for the fact that lately he had been returning more and more often to the days when—unlike now — his faith brought him closer to the divine spark condemned to a life sentence of imprisonment within him, and he naively believed that he was at least twice as chosen by God than most mere mortals.

His first clear memories were from the time when he was Onur's age. He lived with his parents in a mountain town that was native to him but foreign to them in more ways than one, in a spartan room whose meager furnishings could be counted on the fingers of one hand, without a toilet or sink, but with a window offering a decent view, on the second floor of a workers' dormitory, inhabited mainly by Turks who had come here from the gentler side of the mountain for *gurbet*. Years later, when he went into Arabic Studies, he realised just how important this Turkish word was, probably because of its Arabic roots, which were many times longer than its stem and expressed with the precision of a "blade"—painfully—the "cruelty" of "exile" into the "sunset," where everything seems "strange" and makes you feel like a "stranger." Compared to the word "gurbet" brought in from Anatolia, his native "livelihood" was like a folk song from the Rhodope Mountains. Like an Olympic sprinter, he had taken the baton from his parents in his outstretched left hand just when, finding themselves unemployed, they had been forced to return to the east. The Romans had been right: *Lux ex Orient est*. And after two millennia, the light continued to flow from the East, while the West, after filtering and refining it, packaged it in cellophane and sold it as a luxury commodity, equally successful in both the Orient and the Occident. It felt like a broken compass needle—born to point north in the eyes of a world that

had lost its direction, but subsequently flying out like a passenger through the windshield of a crashed car. It never hit the asphalt, but continued to fall freely year after year—increasingly alien to itself and those around it, and increasingly westward, toward its own sunset. And this fall had nothing to do with those from the unsecured terrace on the second floor of the dormitory in the mountain town. On his first fall, the cement below cut off the ribbon of his memory of flying with its freshly sharped pair of garden shears in the first two seconds, but fortunately, with it went the pain, which, like the body, remained numb until his return to life, in the same hospital whose maternity ward four years ago had seen his body and life emerge hand in hand like inseparable friends. His father was waiting for them at the exit, and then, together with him and his mother, Nazmi got into a Volga for the first and last time—the most luxurious socialist vehicle of the time, a worthy opponent to the white limousines from Hollywood productions. He was taken to the hospital by two workers who, according to his mother, noticed the little boy lying face down on the ground because they found it strange that he wasn't crying. In fact, his mother had taken the brunt of the fall when, on her way home from work, seeing the neighbor's children playing on the terrace, she asked one of the little ones: "Where is Nazmi? Did he fall from there?"

"Yes," he replied, "I pushed him."

After ten days in a coma his condition had finally stabilized, and his mother took him out onto the narrow hospital terrace and asked him: "Where did you fall from?"

Without hesitation, he pointed down from the ninth floor: "From there."

Now he lacked precisely such knowledge: when and under what circumstances he had fallen so low. From being pressed too often, the labels on the rewind and fast forward buttons of the time machine had almost worn off. He knew that audio cassettes with music rewound at the same speed as they fast-forwarded, ever since the time when his father, in the midst of the "Great Excursion" (to invest part of the family's savings in items that, if they suddenly left for Turkey, they would be able to sell to get back on their feet), brought home a Hitachi cassette player, but only now did he realize why only the fast forward button bore the name "fast" — going back to the past meant bending lower and lower under a geometrically growing mass of memories; while shaking them off, with a little luck, could take less than a second. Lately, he had been desperately searching his past for some basis for the romantic idea that, despite all the falls from terraces and cliffs in his childhood, the few times he had nearly drowned, and that jar of frozen glue that had smashed into his head after falling a hundred meters, he had survived physically because of some form of divine providence.

If he could figure out where he had strayed from the "right path," he could, if not attempt to return to it, at least understand why he had become the man the Beatles sang about: *I'm not half the man I used to be*, and much later, the lead singer of Depeche Mode, David Gahan, in "Presence of God": *These thoughts torment me/ They mold and shape me/ There's a man that I should be/ Or someone I could be*.

When traveling through time proved fruitless, he pressed *stop* and decided to try a more painful method for his unshakable ego. He asked himself what he meant by "fallen so low," and now it was time for the *record* button, which he had never used before to capture his own voice. The expression sounded somewhat self-pitying and abstract, a form of self-criticism for the divine particle of his soul that had been buried deep inside him. The goal was likely to calm his conscience, to keep it away from suicidal thoughts and unhealthy catharsis. He suppressed his instinct for self-preservation for a moment, and the answer surfaced like an oil spill above a tanker sunk by Somali pirates. He may not have been even half as resilient as the old Nazmi, but over time, that half had managed to clone itself, far more successfully than Dolly the sheep, and now he had at least a dozen copies of himself, each trying to mask the missing half. He hid it not only from others, but also from himself, because its absence spared him the effort of having to defend its principles. With his parents he tried to fit into their idea of a good son and, as such, spared them everything about his biography that would not suit their conservative views; to his colleagues at the Islamic Institute, he appeared to be a fairly orthodox Muslim, while to those at secular universities, he seemed to have modernist views; for those who shared their problems with him, he was the ideal conversationalist, who in a matter of minutes could get under even the thickest skin, and so skillfully that the owner of that skin would not even feel it if he decided to skin him alive. With his partners, again in sync with their level of openness, he behaved sometimes like a reckless gigolo, sometimes like a newly hatched lover with an upcoming debut; with children, he was both a child and a professional babysitter; among aristocrats, he was polite and refined, as if he were one of them; but if anyone stepped on his toes, he turned out to be a seventh-rate troublemaker, ready to resort to physical violence—in other words, to behave in a way that was completely out of character.

It was not that he was insincere with people, on the contrary, but he had developed chameleon-like skills to the point of a permanently split personality. Not only did one hand not know what the other was doing, but the same was true of each hand in relation to itself—shortly after licking its fingers, the right hand was ready to swear on any sacred scripture placed before it that it had not dipped

into the honey pot, while the left hand, simply because it had no mouth, regularly behaved as if butter wouldn't melt in its mouth.

Nazmi suspected, not without reason, that this masquerade had begun when in fifth grade, the state apparatus, without bothering to ask him or his parents, had replaced all their identity documents. At that time the formal split in his personality met with fierce resistance, not only because it was imposed but also because he was faced with an individual—"indivisible" in the literal sense of the Latin "persona". That is why the forcible replacement of his Turkish name with a Bulgarian one, which took place in 1984 (and its constant replacement until 1990), had failed, at least on paper. But apparently, the daily mental harassment at school and on the streets during those years, which coincided with his adolescence, had nurtured in him some subtle complexes that had drained the individual to such an extent that the latter, in order to gain complete control over him, had decided to divide him into as many parts as possible, which, in the name of the Latin ideal of governance—*divide et impera*—he kept ignorant of one another... However, this did not happen during the "Revival/Renaming Process" or in the years immediately following it, but twenty years later. The *record* button had another, not particularly pleasant function—in order to seal the present, it would erase the past recorded on the tape. How many audio cassettes were ruined by accidentally pressing this button, as if deliberately placed at the very beginning, next to the most basic one—play—so that while you stretch out in the dark and think you are choosing the music, it turns out that you have actually dropped the rope with the guillotine blade, and by the time you realize what you have actually done and rush headlong to the ubiquitous stop button, it has already beheaded your favorite song.

Novel, 304 pages
ISBN: 9786197390247
BS Publishing House, 2025

Chavdar *T*SENOV

A Murder on Stamboliyski Boulevard

Chavdar Tsenov was born on 24 March 1956 in Sofia. He graduated the French High School and obtained a degree in Bulgarian philology at St Kliment Ohridski University. He is currently an editor for the Klet publishing house.

Tsenov has enjoyed a varied career, having worked as a teacher of Bulgarian language and literature and as an editor of the journal *Literary Forum*. He also worked in the National Institute of Cultural Monuments and as a reporter for the dailies. He has served department head and director in the State Administration, where he coordinated the "Understandable Bulgaria" project concerning the transcription of Bulgarian names into the Latin alphabet, leading to the Bulgarian Parliament's passing of the *Law on Transliteration*. He has translated such authors as Emil Durkheim, Simone Weil, Jacques Attali and others from French. He was a co-screenwriter for episodes of the Polish series "Deep Water" and written essays and columns for *Sega* (Now) newspaper.

Chavdar Tsenov is the author of the essay collection *The Drowned Fish*, short story collections including *Black under the Fingernails*, *Waltzing Ostriches*, *The Other Door*, and *There Was a*

Day (collected stories), as well as of the novels *Dogs under Indigo*, *The River Flows Somewhere*, *A Murder on Stamboliyski Boulevard,"* an anthology of short novels *Autumnal Diversions*, as well as the novella, *The Old Man Must Die*

His books have been nominated for many national prizes in Bulgaria, including Novel of the Year, Elias Canetti, Peroto (Quill), and the Helikon Prize. He has been twice won the Hristo G. Danov literary prize as well as the annual Culture Portal prize and the Literary Forum prize. In May 2019, Professor Svetozar Igov awarded him the Pencho's Oak award for his prose.

His stories have been translated into Hungarian, German, Spanish, Macedonian and Dutch.

About the book

Radoslav Dyakov is a retired microbiologist. Early one morning he dreams he's gone down to the cellar and found the corpse of his neighbor, Genadi. He wakes up and really does go down to the cellar. On his way back up, he finds Genadi himself in the lift, unconscious with a slightly bloody head. Rado shouts for help. Alexi rushes to his aid, other neighbors come as well. They ring 112, they tell Genadi's wife, Rado feels ill. Turmoil ensues…

As Alexi's wife Danche, takes Rado's blood pressure after the stressful event, Rado tells her about his dream. Genadi later dies in the hospital. Danche spreads word of Rado's dream throughout the building. Whether because of the blood, or Rado's dream, or most of all because no-one believes official narratives, rumors begin to swirl that Genadi has been murdered.

A wealthy firm has moved into the house next to the apartment block. Previously they offered to build a wall around the house and the block at their expense. Locals often sit on the benches in front of the block, making a mess, noise and more. Sometimes late in the evening boisterous lads show up, wannabe gangsters—they smash things, they pick fights with whoever is around, and nobody can sleep. The residents of the apartment building hold a meeting, in which the firm's proposal is rejected, since they are scared that they won't have anywhere to park. This leads to an unprecedented division between them. The firm builds the wall in co-operation with the neighboring block on the other side—and it looks like a Garden of Eden.

Rado decides to investigate Genadi's death with the help of other neighbors, including Milena Savova, a prominent lawyer and her daughter, Addie, a French philology student; and Alexi and Drago (the latter is the only non-resident and lives opposite them in "The Nursery"). Alexi runs a bakery by the block, but his customers have dwindled and he's looking to let the place out.

The investigation zig-zags between looking for motives for Genadi to be murdered and the gradual conviction that his death was from natural causes. Just then Alexi lets his place to a fireworks shop, and Drago warns Alexi that he's seen his grandson hanging around with the wannabe gangsters.

One early evening Rado is on his way home when he sees Addie and two of her friends in front of the former bakery, trembling, surrounded by the wannabes. He intervenes in an attempt to protect them, but they shove him; he is thrown several meters and a protruding bit of iron stabs him in the neck.

The murder on Stamboliyski Boulevard becomes real.

Novel, 232 pages
ISBN: 9789543209569
Riva Publishing House, 2024

A Murder on Stamboliyski Boulevard

EXCERPT *Translated by Christopher Buxton*

"Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself."

—Chief Seattle

"Man does not weave the web of life, he is caught in it. Whatever he does to the web, there is no escape."

—Drago from "The Nursery"

Chapter One

Even if beauty could save the world, vanity would destroy it. Radoslav Dyakov was nearsighted, but only put on his glasses to drive or watch television. For several years he'd had no car, recently it had became increasingly rare for him to sit down in front of the television, so that for most of the time he let the world blur before his eyes. In spite of this, it never occurred to him to step outside with his glasses. Well now, with his scrawny little features they gave him an idiotic rather than intellectual appearance. But other people's faces were unrecognizable. Well now, should he be thinking about other people's faces instead of his own?!

Radosolav Dyakov liked to pose questions whose answers were hidden inside them. On this early Sunday morning he got dressed quickly and without even glancing at his glasses, he grabbed his keys and rushed down the stairs to the cellar. He did not know why he was in a hurry, it was still dark, and what must have been be the time, if it was dark in June?

The door to the apartment block's cellars gaped unlocked. He turned towards his cellar. From down at the opposite end, he heard someone talking, but he couldn't make out anything. He turned on the light and rummaged in the chest of drawers. At first, he had known what he was looking for, but no longer. The search, just like the talking back there, had turned into something remote and incomprehensible. Radoslav Dyakov did not give in easily. From one hand to the

other, he kept juggling flowerpots, a small hoe, a spade, a watering can, various packets of seeds and growth compounds, a pair of crooked pliers—well, where had they all popped up from?

At that moment he heard the shouting outside.

"Who you think you are, virus…"

"Hey steady on… Think where you are…"

"Get out of the way, microbe…"

"Hey, you sorry bacillus…"

Suddenly the dialogue ended in a roar, heavy things crashed, glass was smashed, something banged loudly like a car tire bursting.

Radoslav Dyakov rushed towards the heart of the noise. A few meters ahead a human figure appeared, but he couldn't be sure where it had jumped up from, from the end of the hallway or from the right, but the direction of its travel was definitely towards the exit. Before flying outside, the figure had the audacity to turn its entire face towards him, but instead of a person, Radoslav Dyakov saw only the canvas of a prominent abstract artist.

At the far end of the corridor, a yellow light spilled through a half open door. Inside the shelves had collapsed, who knew how, the corpse (why a corpse then?) lay face down, beside but not beneath them. In a panic, he leant down to turn the body over. And then he saw…

A knife handle stuck out of the nape of the neck. He panicked, and was on the point of pulling out the knife, but remembered that he shouldn't. Even so he turned the body over. It was heavy.

Genadi, this was his neighbor Genadi. But since as he'd turned him over, wouldn't the knife have been driven even deeper into his neck? He panicked once more, returned Genadi to his original position and reached to take out his phone. Only there was no phone. He quickly withdrew to his own cellar and again rummaged through the drawers. "Genadi's been killed, man," yelled someone in Genadi's voice and… Radoslav Dyakov woke up.

A few minutes passed till he got his bearings. First, he stirred and sat up in bed. He wiped his sweaty face with the sleeve of his pajamas and waited for his heart to return little by little to its normal rhythm. What was that nasty dream? Where had it come from? Television was to blame, they only ever show murders and accidents. They fix various scenes in your brain and at the first convenient moment they jump up.

OK, let's really go down to the cellar. Not that he believed in dreams, but he should have brought up that special compost all the way back in the spring, to

shore up the flowers. He was always late taking care of them, they were fading more or less since Nelly. He wasn't up for this job, but his heart wouldn't let him get rid of them. Nelly adored flowers, she spared neither time nor effort to dig them in, weed them, water them. She was always thinking about new varieties, and the pots multiplied. The terrace was unusually large, ideal for the purpose—glassed in but with the possibility on hot days for the windows to slide one under the other and for the sun to pour in on the plants from everywhere. If only the Sofia air was cleaner, but what can you do…

He was already on his way to the cellar, when he slapped his forehead. He went back, put on his glasses, adjusted them, even looked in the mirror. There he contemplated the face of a balding elderly man, eyes—green, still full of life; skin—grown thin, but still taut, like a man who refuses indulgence, eating an ascetic diet, out of necessity.

"How idiotic!" the thought occurred to him. Back in the day, a co-worker had come up with that business about glasses giving him a "stupid look" and he, bloody vanity be damned, had taken it to heart. He wasn't a pensioner yet, but it was as if the folks at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences had nothing better to do than trade wisecracks all day long…. He missed those days.

On the stairs the dawn barely seeped through, looking like last night's embers—if you opened the chimney hatch to let the air in, you'd see flames dancing on a piece of unburnt wood. Radoslav Dyakov stopped for a moment, gazing at the horizon and an absurd idea crossed his mind—he'd open the window and the sun's rays would set the horizon aflame.

There was no one in the cellar, of course. He quickly took out the compost bag and moved a crate with terracotta into its place, since it was sticking out and he could have tripped. He looked over the shelves, peered behind the plasterboard leaning against the wall, and then left. Out of habit he called the lift. He lived on the third floor, the doctors invariably recommended he descend with the lift and ascend on foot. Radoslav Dyakov conscientiously followed their suggestions—he went up in the lift and came down on foot.

The lift was one of the older ones, it slowly creaked past the floors. So it was now, when he called it; it was on the sixth floor, then the fifth, so that… enough time had passed for him to go down to the cellar again and come back. Finally, oblong window on the ground floor lit up from above, the lift shrieked, then let out a sigh, the cage quivered and the door clicked. Radoslav Dyakov opened it and jumped back. First he thought he was dreaming again. This, however, seemed totally naïve, so he looked around and pressed the stair light switch several times,

who knew why, but it was lit in any case. Then he yelled at the top his voice and pulled at the cage door.

"He-e-e-y, peo -eople, He-e-elp! Can you hear me. Is there anyone here?"

Chapter Two

Back in the day, Alexi Todorov used to open his shop in the dark. He sold cigarettes, made coffee. He became really popular in the neighborhood, everyone came to him. However, with the latest tax hike, he decided it wasn't worth it. Loads of rows for almost nothing gained. I'm not—he told himself—selling any more cigarettes, I'm going to stop getting up with the cockerels. Coffee, yes, but the second and third rounds. Let whoever can make the first ones.

And from then on he relaxed. He opened only when he felt ready. The shop was right by the Block entrance. Two or three paces, let's say, and a few more from the door to the ground-floor flat. And even then he'd be late according to the opening times he'd posted.

As for Danche, his wife, there was no use looking for her in the morning. She used to prepare breakfast, and to see their grandson when he was little off to school. Now she'd lie in, then throw something together to eat. Only at lunch time and sometimes even later she'd come to take over from him. Her perpetual excuse was that they often delivered produce before lunch, and she ought not to lift heavy things.

However, this morning Alexi had got up, if not with the cockerels, at least with the bus drivers, because he was going fishing with the first tram. At least that was the story, he usually just took the bakery delivery van. He'd just got himself ready—he'd checked—had he taken documents, money, his phone, he took the tackle out into the corridor: the hooks, the stool, the rubber boots… and he heard the yelling. He'd only heard such shouting once before, when that young boy drowned in the Iskar Reservoir.

He and Drago from "The Nursery" had been squatting by the old road to Samokov. They smoked, drank a drop of homemade stuff to get them talking. But the fish weren't biting, nor did they feel like talking. To the left, not so close by, there were various bar-like buildings right by the shore, spoiling the view. They'd gone past them to get here.

At some point, hysterical shouts could be heard, coming from the buildings: "Mitko's drowning… Help, Mitko is drowning…" They threw down their rods,

they ran, but when they got there, people had gathered, some even had gone into the water…

No-one could do anything, the boy was gone. They'd pulled him out, but too late… Poor boy, come with his girlfriend, with a group, showing off, why, he'd gone in… it was up to here…

So this morning, the shouts seemed to him to be the same as those by the reservoir. Frightful, tearing into you, hitting you in the stomach, making you jump. Shouts which turn your fish bucket upside down, fish with their guts hanging out from a blunt knife…

Alexi threw down his tackle and immediately darted out onto the stairwell. Radoslav Dyakov from the third floor was struggling with the lift's cage. He'd turned white, his neck muscles were protruding and he was yelling. It was as if Alexi understood everything on his own. With an unexpected agility, given his plump body, he immediately bent down to pull at the cage door with all his strength.

"Just you look! Just you look! Just you look!"

Chapter Three

Even in his dreams, Milko Donevski was always turning pages, calculating, scribbling in imaginary notebooks. If you didn't know him, you'd reckon he was a great scholar. Submerged into the invisible world, as though measuring it, making calculations, any moment about to smack his forehead and shout "Eureka!"

Yes, but not quite. Nothing came out of him. At school Physics and Chemistry went well for him, but back then he didn't like them at all. Girls, rock n' roll, alcohol! He let himself go to see and after his army service, he had no choice but to go to the radio votech. At that time, televisions were black and white and were continually breaking down. Later they became colored, and they broke down even more. Milko Donevski got pleasantly rich and it was as if the rustle of banknotes muffled the cries from his nearest and dearest to continue his education. Little by little any attraction to science, to inventions, or to whatever disappeared, just like the beautiful girls…

Now he was simply busy. He was full of ideas, which as a rule never came to anything (with a few exceptions, for example he dreamt of making a special metal detector and he'd recently done just that). His wife, Nadya, called his ideas phantasmagorical.

To find the buried treasure of the Warlord Gigo, near Trun (the locals called him Warlord Giga, but not out of megalomania, but as a residual case ending which is typical for the Trun dialect), of Brother Spatanos near Akhtopol or of Afif Bey whose location was a little more complicated as it could have been one of two places, far away from each other. To soup up a Volkswagen engine, or as the saying goes, to turn the Volkswagen into something like a Porsche. To put together a perpetuum mobile from the hundreds of gadgets, casings and mechanisms, piled up over the years. OK, not exactly a perpetuum mobile, but still a special task which was not at all easy and which Milko Donevski insisted on keeping secret even from Nadya.

Yet more ideas teamed in Milko's brain, each more fantastic and therefore more attractive in his eyes. At night when he lay down, he'd follow in the steps of one of them. He usually fell asleep quickly, but that didn't mean at all that the idea went to sleep. It stayed awake, it made sure to sneak various details about itself into his sleep, sometimes even at dawn, it succeeded in nudging him, so that when Milko opened his eyes, it would quickly whisper what he had to do, so that this or that could happen…

That morning Nadya was away on a business trip and it was probable Milko could have stayed in bed till noon, but the treasure of Warlord Gigo nudged him: "Back then, you didn't check the end of the wall did you?" the pot of gold coins demanded sternly and he agreed… he hadn't checked, it was true, and it wouldn't surprise him, he thought…

At this moment he clearly heard shouts, somewhere a door banged, Milena Savova's voice broke in: "Who's shouting? What's going on?"

Wasn't it a bit early for decibels, he worried, and to his own surprise he jumped up. In a minute he joined the staircase commotion.

Chapter Four

That night Milena Savova had slept badly. As invariably happened when Addie didn't come home. Just as she'd forced herself to stop worrying unnecessarily and not allow her fantasies to develop into neurasthenia. Ah, how she didn't want to be like those mothers who were turned into hysterical shadows by worries about their children. There again, to tell the truth, she'd never been scared, she didn't panic. She kept a cool head, you could say, even at the worst moments of her life.

Just that this was stronger than she was. Waking up—that was it. No, she wasn't thinking about Addie. At least not in that way—where she is, with whom, has something bad happened to her and so on. On the contrary she'd consciously be thinking of other things…yes, but then subconsciously…

She couldn't get to sleep, she lit the lamp to read, at some point she switched it off, then switched it on again. Only in the morning would she drift off for an hour and that was all. And she hated going to the office unrested. She became irritable, and in this case it was scarcely surprising that she might raise her voice at a colleague or even a customer…

So here and now, she was tossing in the bed and getting ever more worked up. She even forgot it was Sunday, she'd decided that at all events she had to get at least a small morning dose of sleep when from somewhere outside her front door, an unusual noise crept up. All her scarcely contained maternal feeling exploded and shot her from the bed. Paying no attention to self-control and its eternal principles—not to rush, to think things over, before leaping out—she was dressed in a second and out of the door.

Chapter Five

Whatever you're like when awake, that's how you are asleep. Ask Stamen Nikolov. He's a guy who's lively and loud. When he drinks, he drinks, when he sings, he sings. When he falls asleep, you can put a hoover next to his ear, makes no difference. So that he doesn't set an alarm clock. There's no reason to. It would wake up the neighbors, and he'd carry on snoring ever so sweetly.

In any case, he'd never had to get up early. Not previously when he worked for the clubs, nor lately when he worked for the Football Association. In those waters early risers are not rated highly. There are some who make out they're immortal. Runs in the morning, weights in the evening but they're the exception. Usually in the event, healthy football bodies (of the practitioners so to say) get mixed up with the bulging tummies of the promoters with their drooping shoulders and with everything shameful that suits theoreticians (that's why they're called promoters) working mainly in pubs. And here and there amongst the bulging tummies, there'll be someone clumsily stocky, with heavy uncoordinated movements. Just like Stamen Nikolov, a sturdy guy with sturdy features, a big nose and a loud voice.

But with all his bluster, which often deafens those around him, there was some antenna in him, sensing what could not be captured on other frequencies.

He didn't himself know how he captured it, but he did. That was all. He'd say to his wife, Tsena, for example, "Mark my words, that fraud, the new guy on the Football Council, he'll mess up. Don't look at him now how he's stuck up with his success, have a look at him later." And to Tsena's amazement, hardly a year passed and the fraud messed up. Such things happened frequently.

The important thing was, it wasn't so very strange that Rado's shouting woke him up that morning. No, not the shouting, he found out about that later. How loud would the shouts have to be to reach the fourth floor? Not especially, they could be heard vaguely. That was the point—not their strength, but something else, unusual at this time, was what woke him up. Not the shouts, but a sense of the shouting, something in the air, something special in the air.

You cannot understand—and Stamen himself could not understand. He opened his eyes, then sat up in bed and… thought it through. Outside something was happening, definitely happening, somewhere downstairs. He was worried, he quickly threw off the blanket and grabbed his clothes. In seconds he opened the flat door. Milena opened hers opposite and raised her voice, but he was already jumping down the stairs. Two, three at a time. He was that kind of guy. When he descended, he descended.

Chapter Six

That husband of hers was always awake. As if the past was sour cabbage and he'd be chewing on it all night. He liked neither the taste nor the color of this past life and somewhere at dawn, according to the season, in the semi-dark or light, he would at last let out a deep breath and get up. Supposedly quiet, on tiptoe, he'd still find something to knock into and wake her up. After this, Boryana Simidchieva would be rolling over furiously in bed, until she was whisked away into a dream-troubled morning doze.

Sometimes sleep would take her through the vague outlines of imaginary worlds, other times it would land her here in the apartment or the village, but every time beside her continually dissatisfied husband. No, it wasn't exactly like that. He was mostly dissatisfied in the apartment, while in the village—"because it depends," a favorite phrase of his. That was his kingdom, here the television like the apartment turned him into a moaner in seconds.

In her realistic dreams, she would sometimes stroke his stubborn head, other times she would speak to him sternly, "Why are you so dissatisfied? Why are you

always grumbling, always abusive, always swearing? And it's always the rich in your sights, always yearning for some kind of fairness. What fairness, darling! When has it ever existed, that you think you can have it? Or are you just saying this, you're looking for an excuse to grumble, to not like things. This is your vocation or, if you like, your hobby—not liking stuff. There, when have I ever heard you utter something nice about someone or something? Except for the garden. I do agree you love that. Tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, garlic, zucchini, digging and sewing, preserving and boiling, there's your true element. You were a village boy and that's what you remain. But why did you have to leave the village and become a clerk in the Ministry?"

That morning, sleeplessness had driven him out of bed once more. He got up in a moment, murmuring something like an apology. Boryana drifted off and… that's all. That was what the hand of fate had written. What if she'd known, what if she'd got up as well? But how would she have known? Can anyone read what fate has written or know tomorrow's letters?

Days, seasons, years—Boryana Simidchieva would stride after them and only fears filled her. Before it was about the children, now about the grandkids. Her worries had no end. And the letters that spell out what would happen tomorrow were remote and incomprehensible. Only when tomorrow came, she read them—yet they spelled nothing out of the ordinary. And thank God. They did not bring her fears to life. But here, this morning the bell shrieked like a fire alarm. She jumped up, threw something on and… he'd gone, never to be seen again. Life stopped.

Boyan YORDANOV

Under the Moon, Huge as a Pumpkin

Boyan Yordanov (1971) was born in Botevgrad. He is he author of the novel *The Beloved Ones* (2022). His stories have been published in *Literaturen Vestnik (Literary Newspaper)*, *Stranitsa (Page)* magazine, and various online publications. Yordanov is a biotechnologist and doctor of chemical engineering, and works in a pharmaceutical company. *Under the Moon, Huge as a Pumpkin* is his second novel.

Yordanov believes that good books are like good friends. Open spaces without walls and ceilings filled with silence and spirit energize him, which is why he loves to wander in nature, photograph it, or simply contemplate it.

About the book

At the dawn of the 20th century, in the small village of Zanovets, in the heart of the airy Macedonian territories, two boys were born. Despite their contrasting personalities, values, and goals, their childhood friendship would always inspire them to compete with each other, as fate would bring them together and separate them again, unite them and oppose them. This novel tells the story of a single day, a day that encompasses two human lives and over half a century of history.

"Unlike the moon, history is never singular. History, like man, is woven in nuances that we can see, feel, and fill with meaning. Boyan Yordanov's characters tell us about the first half of the twentieth century, showing us a time that is both near and distant. Large-scale novels like this one, just like the moon, save people from the darkness of oblivion."

Nikolay Terziyski, author and journalist

Novel, 432 pages
ISBN: 9786191869435
Janet 45 Publishing House, 2025

Under the Moon, as Huge as a Pumpkin

E X C E R P T *Translated by Desislava Toncheva*

Five o'clock in the morning
"This wind will blow something in…" the man thinks.
His scanty white hair flutters in the gusts.
The dog next to him raises its snout,
and scrunches its nostrils,
taking in small bits of information from the wild oncoming stream.
St. Dimitar's Day is coming.
The weather is changing.
The man knows that it will soon get cold.
It will be tough here in the mountains, but there is no way
he can go down to the village.
Besides, he doesn't want to.
He is fine here.
Down below, he can no longer do the work he loves.
And it's pretty much the only thing that tethers him to life.
Down below, fear has spread like a spider's web.
It has everyone wrapped in its threads.
It's easier with animals.
Fear makes them jump, run, fight.
But after that, they are the same again.
With people, it's different.
Fear sucks them dry from the inside.
Like a spider sucks its prey dry.
They become brittle and frail.
And they disappear into the wind.
Like dust from a puffball mushroom.
Like scattered straw.
Dreadful business…
Fear for one's own life and for that of one's children.
Especially for the children...
Damn those children!

So many sins are committed in their name...
People were going down before his eyes.
And he himself had begun to go down along with them all.
Because the entire ground under his feet was simply giving way.
And there was nowhere to go.
Dreadful business…
His veins chilled when he saw how they, the new ones, were trying to kill faith.
Faith in something more.
Something different.
Something beyond.
Something greater than anything the eyes
can take in and measure.
The only faith allowed now is in themselves.
But the man cannot have faith in them, they are too small.
Poverty had once made them disadvantaged.
But they did not use it as an opportunity to grow.
Which is why he prefers solitude here, in the wilderness.
He did not choose this life, but perhaps it has done him good.
He looks around for the wood chopping block that's usually in front of the hut door.
He spots it in the darkness a few meters ahead.
The wind has knocked it over and rolled it over there.
He hurries to pick it up and put it back in its place.
Deep breath…
He can't catch his breath.
Lately, he often feels short of breath.
Sometimes after just a few steps.
A wet leaf drips onto his head
and plops into his mouth.
The man spits it out to catch his breath again.

1.

Anyway, many years ago, on that early morning in 1933, spring couldn't wait to become summer, and the light breeze that brushed his face was as gentle as a caress. His reputation as a skilled craftsman had spread, and he was traveling to Gorna Dzhumaya to make a carved ceiling for a local merchant.

The carriage jolted him along the road to Kulata, where he had to catch the *dekovilka*, the narrow-gauge railway, to Gorna Dzhumaya. He waited impatiently for it to get light enough out to read, then unfolded his favorite satirical newspaper, *The Cricket*. A few months ago, this newspaper had accidentally found its way into his workshop, and since then, even though he lived far away from the capital, he had been looking for ways to get his hands on every new issue.

He read and his eyes smiled.

A microbe met a flea and had to stretch up high to see it. The microbe sighed. He complained about how awful it was to be a dwarf, but the flea reassured him that he was fine, that it only seemed that way to him because she was such a giant.

"Ha... heyyy!" he laughed loudly.

"What, master, is something funny...?" asked Milé the farmhand from the coachbox. He, together with his wife, helped him with the housework and worked his fields.

"Listen..." the master began enthusiastically, but his words were cut short because at that very moment two men jumped out from the roadside bushes, waving revolvers.

"Stop the horse!" yelled one of them, running up and grabbing the reins. The barrel of his pistol was pointed at Milé's head.

The other one climbed into the carriage and pressed his barrel against the master's forehead.

"Your money or your life..."

"My life," the master said quietly, his eyes clouded and downcast.

The other man struck him with his open palm. "Are you.. ha-ha-having me on, man?!"

"I'm helping you rob me faster."

Two wolfish eyes gleamed from under the stammerer's cap.

"Damn, you…you ri-ri-rich bastard," he hissed through his teeth and proceeded to pummel him all over.

The master covered himself with both hands, but the man did not stop hitting him.

"Hey, Apostle," the other man shouted, out in front of the horse, "take the money and let's go, someone might come by."

"Le-le-let's go!" The stammerer gestured with his fingers.

The master reached for the coat spread out on the seat next to him and pulled his wallet out of the inside pocket.

"That's all. A thousand leva."

The other man opened the wallet, quickly closed it without counting, hit the master one last time, and jumped out of the carriage. He and his friend disappeared into the bushes.

"Are you hurt, master?" asked Milé, who had jumped off the box and was now looking at him with concern.

The master was silent for a long time, as he wiped his bloody nose.

"No, I'm not! These people have gone mad. We surely fought shoulder to shoulder in the past. We may have even been in the same trench, you know?"

"What people, master! No one wants to be a 'people.' Everyone longs to be the hero!"

"It's hard to live on just pure longing."

"Oh, come on! Can't you see how much suffering this longing has brought upon the people! But those at the top are also to blame, because they treat the people like a woman's breast, they use them once for one thing, then for something else."

The master's eyes cleared.

"Milé, my friend... Your sayings should be printed here, in the newspaper!"

"In that bloody newspaper?" Milé pointed to the newspaper, now stained with the master's blood. "I don't know what people might learn from my sayings, but I think we should be getting ourselves a gun, damn them all!"

"Those eyes..." The master looked away in disgust. "He had the eyes of a wolf, that one, cold, unmoving. You didn't see him... it was as if he wasn't human."

"Come on now! He didn't do anything inhuman."

"May I never see those eyes again!"

That was what the master hoped then, in that gentle spring of 1933, but the time would come when he would see those eyes again.

Six o'clock in the morning
There are piles of branches around the hut.
He pulls one out.
He puts it on the stump.
Starts chopping with the axe,
and stops every two swings to catch his breath.
Whether from the meager food or his heart... his strength
is quickly fading.
He'll need it when the cold weather sets in.
Wood...

When Milé comes, he chops up few
pieces of wood for him, here and there.
That Milé!
He comes all the way up here.
Regularly!
Brings him food, takes care of him to this day.
He should come around today.
He's almost out of bread.
In the cold weather, people seem to eat more.
He worries about his food.
He has to talk to Milé about more bread so he can make crackers for the winter.
When the snow piles up and blocks everything,
neither Milé, nor even the Devil himself could come this way.
At least there is enough wood...
Slowly but surely... he will chop it...
He pulls another branch from the pile.
He unwittingly keeps picking the thinner ones.
The other ones, they can wait.
It's not like he has to do it all now...
But his heart thumps like an empty pail in a well.
His chest feels heavy.
Is it his heart, or is it a stone...
It tightens.
The dog next to him is dozing, whimpering a bit.
It must be dreaming of something too.
No, it probably needs a doctor.
Should he ask Milé to take it?
Then he remembers that he can't.
Because he can't leave... things like this... here.
He leans the axe against the wall of the hut.
Sits down on the stump.
The dog crawls forward slightly and rests its muzzle
on his foot.

2.
By the way, when he was born, the year was 1891. All in all, that time was nothing special, except for his mother and father, who were truly delighted at his first cry,

and that was probably because they didn't know then that in order for a person born in that year to reach old age, they had to be very lucky.

They named him Stoimen, meaning "resilient," because several of his parents' children had died before they even managed to utter their first word, "mama." It was as if God wanted to protect them from life itself and from the words that would inevitably follow.

Stoimen, however, was destined for a different fate.

His relatives called him Stoyu for short.

At that time, a little further north, the Unification of the northern and southern Bulgarian territories had already been declared, confirmed by the war with the Serbs; and right there, just a little further north, people had been living in a free country for several years, no longer under Turkish rule. This seemed strange and unfair to many, since once upon a time, both these people and those people had shared the same burden and were one nation. That is why, without a doubt, it could be said that here, like low-lying fog on the ground, there was a heavy feeling of orphanhood and abandonment.

It was very likely that this was exactly how another small five-year-old boy, just like Stoyu, felt as he stood in front of that half-open door. He stared silently, even forgetting to breathe, while inside the inner room, the village *pandurin*, the Ottoman sentry, lay on top of his mother. The little boy did not run outside, he did not cry; he stood in front of the crack in the door, and a sharp beam of light cut across his face, right across one of his eyes. With his oversized shirt reaching down to the ground, hitched up with a cloth belt made from old trousers so as not to get in the way, inside which he was left to grow at will, he somewhat resembled a heavenly creature. Perhaps that was precisely why no one paid him much attention. And when the pandurin came out, tucking his shirt into his trousers, he just grinned, and his crooked mouth and sparse teeth seemed to sap the last of the boy's strength. His mother took the money the man had thrown at her, got up, and tucked it away with the rest, in a pouch in the bottom of the chest where they kept their holiday clothes. Then she turned the holy icon around so the image was facing out and made the sign of the cross. She mumbled something and sobbed, then went out and found her child standing there.

"What are you doing here, Taso?" she asked him, wiping her eyes. "Weren't you supposed to be at Tsveti's, seeing what kind of chicks will hatch?"

"Black ones..." said the boy, and only then did he wrinkle his nose and start to cry.

His mother's face turned pale; she bent down and hugged him.

"Don't cry, I'll buy you some shoes so you don't have to walk barefoot. And cheese, Taso, I'll buy some cheese, and I'll spread butter on a thick slice of bread so you can eat your fill. For you, son, for you..."

She looked at him and saw that these words did not distract him, but rather he began to choke back tears, quietly, without a sound, deep inside himself.

"Taso, do you see that pot on the stove? Say a word to your father and sisters when they come back from the fields, just one word... and I'll boil you alive inside it."

Taso said nothing. He was growing up slowly and watched silently as his father made the sign of the cross in front of the icon of the Virgin Mary every evening. He was probably giving thanks that another hard day had ended safely, or that this year the pandurins hadn't charged too much money for guarding the fields and orchards, or perhaps he was giving thanks for his son's new boots.

A few years later, he and Stoyu started school. The school was Turkish because there was no Bulgarian school in the village, and most Bulgarians, with the exception of a few Greek sympathizers, would not even consider sending their children to the Greek school.

So, at that time, subject to the laws of nature, Stoyu and Taso decided to prove which of the two was braver. Each of them had to go to the village cemetery at midnight and stay there as long as they could.

Taso went first. He walked down there whistling and didn't return until dawn, when he had to take the cattle out to graze. Stoimen had no choice but to spend the whole night there as well. "Stoyu," Taso told him, "it's not scary. Only, if you see a black *karakondzhul* or a vampire coming out of a grave, stay calm so they don't get angry."

It was the perfect time for such a thing, some would say: a dark night with a cloud-covered sky, the only lights being the fireflies flickering here and there. At least the crickets were chirping melodiously, which somewhat reassured Stoyu.

He tried to walk carefully, even though he couldn't see where he was stepping. Still, the closer he got, the slower his steps became. In his desperation, a thought crossed his mind that was more becoming of a grown man. He thought that this was complete lunacy and that courage was not equal to the time spent at a cemetery at night just because, without any reason. He paused. He was about to wave it off and turn around, but he continued on.

"God, Mother of God, God, Mother of God, God, Mother of God..." the whisper came out of his mouth as he lifted the broken wooden gate to the cemetery to open it. It creaked much more loudly than he expected.

He decided there was no point in closing it behind him because... why should he close it?

He continued with small strides, stopping at every step to listen. He reached the first grave.

Well, this could be considered a cemetery, right? Slowly and carefully, he sat down next to the wooden cross. This must be Vangel's grave. Stoyu had heard of him, he made tables and chairs. He was good at his craft. He worked only with a plane and a saw, but when you know what you are doing, everything is easy, people said. Stoyu wasn't sure that was exactly true, but that's what people said. This Vangel had also been a freedom fighter.

And maybe he had been, maybe he had been a craftsman and a freedom fighter, but now there he was, his grave overgrown with weeds, his cross soft as a mushroom, leaning to one side. He felt sorry for the carpenter. He even tried to straighten the broken cross. Then he froze and listened for any noises he shouldn't be hearing. Nothing. Only silence. A deep silence, which was quite normal for such a place. The darkness suited it too. The people here don't need light or noise. What do they need such things for? Come on! They must have heard and seen enough in the past, and most of it was probably things they didn't want to hear or see.

When a gust of wind arose and blew the clouds away, and that round moon shone, however, it all seemed to get worse. The moon stood heavy and self-important in the middle of the sky like a stone in dark water.

The fact that it stood there so calmly seemed unnatural to Stoyu, and he thought that if this moon didn't go away, it would eventually fall on his head and crush him. The shadows it cast speckled the ground. It was as if everything had grown tails. He wanted to be there now. He imagined himself standing on that distant moon, that shining piece of solid rock, surrounded on all sides by a pitch-black sky, whistling and looking down with mockery at the gloomy earth with its long shadows, and spotting the ridiculous Stoyu, clutching the carpenter Vangel's rotten wooden cross and looking around nervously, like a little child, not a real man.

That's what he was thinking when, out of the corner of his eye, he seemed to catch a glimpse of a shadow. He felt his heart stop and then, after a moment's hesitation, beat strongly in his chest. He turned abruptly and then saw behind a stone cross a shadow of a man with his arms raised. "Awwwwoooo!" the shadow howled, waving its arms menacingly.

"Aaaah!" Stoyu cried out and rushed towards the open gate. He was trembling all over, and tears streamed from his eyes. He even cried out loud, but that didn't

prevent him from hearing Taso's mad giggling behind him.

After that, for a while, Taso mocked him for being as scared as a woman. But things got even worse when Rumyana, a girl from the village who was almost their age, raised her hands threateningly and screeched at him: "Aaaagggh!"

And when his father, Georgi Pamukchiyata, realizing that Stoyu had been sneaking out of the house at night, rolled up his sleeves, unhooked the rope that was hanging from one of the beams in the barn, twisted it several times to make it stronger, and devotedly, without sparing his strength, managed to quickly impart a significant part of his wisdom to his son.

Vladimir ZAREV

I, Too, Descended

Vladimir Zarev was born in 1947 in Sofia. He graduated in Bulgarian Philology from Sofia University—St. Kliment Ohridski. Since 1972, he has worked for the prominent magazine for Bulgarian and world literature *Suvremennik* (Contemporary), and since 1988, he has served as its editor-in-chief.

Vladimir Zarev is the author of the novels *The Day of Impatience*, *The Hound*, *The Hound Against the Hound*, *Year of Our Lord 1850*, *Worlds*, *Ruin*, *Pop Bogomil and the Perfection of Fear*, *Eagles' Bridge*, *The Monster*, and *Free and Confused*, among others. Within his body of work, the epic family saga *Genesis*, *Exodus*, and *The Law* occupies a special place. The action in the novels begins in 1890 and ends in the present day. The trilogy has been translated into German and has already had several reprintings in Austria and Germany.

Vladimir Zarev's novel *Ruin* is also hugely popular and has enjoyed incredible success in the German-speaking world. It has been nominated for two prestigious European literary awards and has received over 40 rave reviews.

Hermes Publishing House has also reissued Zarev's book for children of all ages, *The Big Strange Garden*. The luxurious illustrated edition is a true polygraphic gem.

Vladimir Zarev is a winner of the Ivan Vazov and Elin Pelin National Literary Awards. In 2017, he was also awarded the St. Paissiy Hilendarski State Award, while in 2019, he received the Stara Planina Order, First Class, from the Bulgarian president for his outstanding contributions to culture and the arts. Since 2021, he has held the title of "academic" within the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. In 2022, he was awarded the Pero (Quill) Lifetime Achievement Award for contributions to literature.

About the book

In his latest novel, *I, Too, Descended*, Vladimir Zarev explores the themes of faith and the absurdity of belief, topics he has investigated in his previous novels. However, in this fictionalized recounting of the early years of Jesus Christ's life, he wrestles openly and personally with the questions of suffering, sacrifice and spirituality. As the author himself puts it:

"I have never felt such excitement, which is immense for two reasons: the first is that, unless God decides otherwise, this will be my last novel. And the second, which is even more important, is the content of the book.

In it, I have tried to convey all my spiritual experience, accumulated over the course of 50 years. I have constantly wondered why the topic of Jesus Christ's crucifixion continues to move people 2,000 years later. Why does this story have such a lasting and extraordinary presence in the spiritual life of humanity? Another question that has troubled me is why God sent Christ, who was both human and divine, to earth to resolve the problem of power? He could have sent an angel, yet he decided otherwise. I believe that in *I, Too, Descended* I have managed to answer this question as well.

I dreamed that I had to write this book and try to answer many of the questions that have been on my mind for years. This novel is my most important book."

Novel, 176 pages
ISBN: 9789542624646
Hermes Publishing House, 2025

I, Too, Descended

EXCERPT *Translated by Angela Rodel*

The cross was raised up, Christ was
Crucified, Christ rose again and man
was saved.
—Inscription on a lead amulet from the 10th century
worn for health and salvation by an unknown Bulgarian
of the time.

Credo quia absurdum. (I believe, because it is absurd).
—Tertulian

1.

I, too, descended...

I, too, guided by My Father—as I would come to understand much later—sent in silence and stillness, I truly descended. I broke away from my existence as unattainable, omnipresent, and untouchable, I left the womb of darkness, the bright blackness of the universe, the trembling, barely glimmering light of the stars, and I incarnated, I poured myself into knowability, into normalcy and ordinariness, into tedious repetition and into flesh. I did it so as to melt into the noise, into the smells and the madness of this world, to pop out in a miserable cave used to shelter livestock, stinking of mustiness and dung. I did it to immerse myself in the exhaustion of everyday life, to disappear, in fact, it was to lose Myself, to erase and forget Myself. To become a human being, such a simple yet so tormented, tangled up and complicated human being. And to set off on the long and yet so short path to my destiny, to the meaning, which, together with my death, I would bring to the people in the form of hope.

After all, My Father had taken care of it, and alongside me, the Star of Bethlehem was born and rose above the world as an omen and a new direction!

Indeed... if something is not absurd but instead obvious, we accept it un-

conditionally, and then, once it is a proven fact, what is the point of our spiritual belief in it? What is the point of faith at all if it is not directed toward something impossible, unattainable, truly absurd, if it is not directed toward some kind of Miracle?

2.

I was a completely ordinary and unremarkable child, pale and scrawny, often ill, and my mother, as well as Joseph, whom I then called my father, were constantly fearful for me. Hardly a disease went by that I didn't catch, and during those times, anesthetized by my own weakness, I remained in bed, while Mother Mary and Joseph watched over me with redoubled diligence. It's the truth, I'm telling you the honest truth... They kept watch over my bed with an odd, somewhat exaggerated earnestness, as if they were expecting something mysterious from me. As if they hoped I would do something inexplicable and incredible, something supreme and everlasting.

But otherwise, I was rambunctious and mischievous, my knees were always scraped, I was no stranger to bloody noses, once I fell from the fig tree in our yard and ended up with a gushing wound on my forehead. I loved playing and running around with the other children to my heart's content, yet I was also attracted to the dim light of my father's workshop. The axes, saws, drills, chisels, planes, and other tools strangely attracted me, and even then I knew I would learn the wood's secrets and become friends with it, that I would become a carpenter like my father. As the years passed, I learned to feel the wood's soul by touching it, and I realized that even when it's dead, wood remains strangely alive. From an early age, I often shut myself away in Joseph's workshop, found rough pieces of oak, and made figurines. I was most drawn to carving the image of our god, Jehovah. I whittled them with much enthusiasm and effort, then gave them to my older cousins or left them in the synagogue.

In the workshop, semi-darkness always greeted me, a ray of sunlight penetrating through a narrow window like an arrow slit, along with the faint smell of thick glue, dry wood, and wonder. Because what happened in Joseph's hands was a wonder... from simple planks, a sturdy table was born, around which a whole family could gather, or a solid cupboard that could hold a week's worth of food, or an elegant shelf upon which an alembic and candles would burn at night to prolong the day, or even a comfortable bed made of strong oak that would harbor

the fatigue and dreams of two people, a man and a woman, who had vowed to be together.

My father's workshop was low-ceilinged, cramped, and located in the yard of our house. Alongside it, beams of beech and priceless oak were neatly stacked, raised on logs and intertwined so that the wood could dry in the sun and the light breeze. Above it spread the branches of a huge fig tree, planted in times long past, which gave off soothing shade and a heavy, sweet scent, and which I loved to climb. Its fruit was large, juicy, and extraordinarily delicious

I was stubborn and disobedient like any child, I respected my parents, worshipped them even, but I also loved freedom, the recklessness of freedom, that urge to stir up mischief and cause all kinds of trouble. When I was very small and my mother took me with her to the synagogue, I would strip naked and start running among the lay people. This made people smile, they joined in the game, hid me, protected me from my mother and did not allow her to catch and dress me. When I turned five, I began to feel ashamed and no longer allowed my mother to undress me; Joseph bathed me instead.

I was naughty and not particularly kind. I remember, for example, how the neighborhood children and I buried a newborn kitten in a pile of sand on the street. I didn't feel sorry for it, but when I heard its mother crying, a skinny, exhausted striped drained dry by her kittens, I started to cry and dug it out, giving it back air and light. Later, that kitten grew so attached to me that it followed me everywhere like a dog. Yes, I was not merciful, but I was compassionate in my own strange way, and these contradictory feelings about the world around me often overwhelmed me, confused me, and made me lose sleep.

I dreamed a lot, every night even, and my dreams were colorful and filled with some whiff of predestination. I was haunted by strange visions of a distant, wondrous, and radiantly bright land that began high above the clouds and continued into the boundless expanse, into the infinity of the sky and the world. Everything in it was so dazzling and beautiful that it blinded me. At night, I often had a recurring nightmare that I was not free, that my body was small, and I was somehow unbearably, intolerably large, that I was forcibly confined, crammed into myself as if into a hard, uncomfortable shell. Sometimes I'd wake up drenched in sweat and almost suffocating from terror. Then I'd start to cry, and even the generous arms of my mother Mary could not comfort me.

I was blessed with a lively and penetrating imagination, I was constantly trying to explain the world around me, thinking up all sorts of impossible, most often frightening things, which forced me to fib. I often told my parents I was

going to the synagogue to study Hebrew, the laws, and the Talmud, but then I would sneak away to the foot of Mount Tabor, which strangely attracted me, even though there was nothing unusual about it; it was covered with dull vegetation and unhappened life.

On moonlit nights, I would gather the children around me and tell them all sorts of tall tales; for example, I claimed that somewhere on the roads of Galilee I'd met David, who had told me that he would soon take aim with his slingshot and defeat Goliath, and with him I personified the arrogant and insolent Romans who ruled over my people. I also told them that on Mount Tabor, near Nazareth, I had met a strange being, unknown and majestic, and that before my eyes it had disintegrated into light, turning into a wondrous, indescribable, perfect, and divine light that blinded me, draining all the color from the day and conquering it. However, when they asked me what this creature was, I answered honestly that it resembled a man, a man made of flesh, who, after gleaming in his unearthly brilliance, had returned from the light and stood before me, visible and astonishingly ordinary.

I must admit that I fibbed even about the most ordinary things, for example, when I tried to trade a new toy Joseph had made me for a piece of roast meat or a few handfuls of chickpeas boiled and sprinkled with lemon juice. This wild imagination of mine tormented because it constantly forced me to live in a world of my own invention, which was everywhere around me yet at the same time was not there, it did not exist. Thus, even as a baby, I understood that the world around me was infinite, and not because it could not be traversed and explored with sight, hearing, and other senses, but because it was populated by people, by words, which made it other and unknowable. With my whole being, I also understood that the world we live in, which surrounds us, is real, that the material world around us exists, but when deprived of our spiritual curiosity, it is an elusive, still-latent form of existence, a daydream of the material world. To awaken this world, which was lost in itself, it needed to be named, and thus human curiosity, imagination, intuition, and above all, the Word, awaken Being and transform it from existence into narrative, and then into Meaning and Memory. Indeed, imagine a tree on the street. It is present and at the same time absent, as if lost in itself, and in order to emerge from this half-sleep, we must not only see it, but also distinguish it within ourselves, pay attention to it, or mention it. This slipping away of the surrounding world, this transformation of everything we encounter into a semi-sleep, into incompleteness and infinity, is one of the most magnificent pieces of proof about the existence of God, I thought to myself, and

I looked at some random object to give it a name, a meaning, and to make it part not only of the visible, but of myself.

Only my cousin John, who often visited us in Nazareth, was more mischievous, rowdy, and disobedient than me. He was incredibly bullheaded, never acquiescing to what the adults demanded, yet in the evenings he would quiet down, he loved listening to my dreams and my lies, my tales and unbelievable, sometimes frightening, stories that came to mind and which I would tell him before we fell asleep. It turned out that John ruled our games by day, while I had mastered the secrecy, solitude, and mystery of the night.

To rouse this world so lost in itself, it must be named, and thus human curiosity, imagination, intuition, and the Word above all awaken Being and transform it from existence into narrative, and then into Meaning and Memory. Indeed, imagine a tree on the street. It is present and at the same time absent, as if lost in itself, and in order to emerge from this half-sleep, we must not only see it, but also distinguish it within ourselves, pay attention to it, or mention it. This slipping away of the surrounding world from us, this transformation of everything we encounter into a half-sleep, into incompleteness and infinity, is one of the most magnificent proofs of the existence of God, I thought to myself, and I looked at some random object to give it a name, meaning, and make it part not only of the visible, but of myself.

I'd heard from my mother and Joseph that when I was born, we'd had to flee and hide for reasons unknown to me, but from faintly overheard conversations I had learned that my life had been at risk. Something cruel and powerful had threatened me in my very earliest years, and we'd had to move to Egypt to hide me from prying eyes. From my cousin John, I also learned that in those times of savage violence, many babies, completely sinless and innocent, had been sought out by Herod the Great's soldiers and were horribly and needlessly slaughtered. Thanks to the care of my mother Mary and Joseph, thanks to their composure and courage, I was saved and, praise be to God, I survived and to their great joy and pride, had the chance to grow up.

They called me Yeshua, my name was Yeshua, I was known as Yeshua...

3.

By the age of ten, I could read fluently and was doing so well with Hebrew, the Talmud, and the Pentateuch that the rabbi at our synagogue called my parents to

the temple and advised them to send me to the Essenes so that I could gain the knowledge he could not give me.

"If he stays here, he will become a carpenter like you," he told my father, Joseph, "but your son has a bright mind and enviable diligence. He was born for something important and unusual, for something more than turning wood into simple boards and sturdy furniture."

When he heard this, my father Joseph fell silent, smiled kindly, somehow knowingly, and my mother Mary began to cry, yet before they told me their decision, they had already made it. I enjoyed learning, ignorance diminished me and troubled my mind, but I was not happy.

The truth, I'm telling you the truth... I was afraid to be alone, afraid to go live among strangers and leave everything I loved behind. The night before we set out, I curled up in the darkness, looked through the window at the bright stars, cold and indifferent, and cried. I cried pitifully and for a long time. I cried because I already knew I would lose myself. Everything in my life would change. And hadn't the prophets foretold it... there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth!

4.

The first evening I spent with the Essenes, I experienced a crushing loneliness that multiplied to the point of cruelty. It was as if they had taken me and left me alone in the desert—entering it is east, but leaving it is difficult and uncertain. Qumran was actually an entire town, densely populated, yet somehow a person find himself there slowly, you needed time to get to know it, lots of time to catch a glimpse into its mysteries, and even more time still to get used to it. On one side was the Dead Sea, whose cliffs along the coast were covered with salt and glittered like mica, lit up by the bright, fierce sun. On the other side began the desert, slow, drawn out, one and the same in its singularity, deathly boring and fatally voracious. Throughout the day in Qumran, you could feel the breath of the desert, while in the evening, we were flooded with the nocturnal chill and the bloodless moisture of the Dead Sea.

I was housed in the students' building, sharing a stone-hewn room with four other pupils and my cousin John, but on the first night I felt so abandoned, so cruelly alone, that I went to sleep on the roof. There, under the blazing stars, under the sky filled with emptiness and indifference, I could cry to my heart's

content. Then, for the first but not the last time, I felt someone's vague, somehow frightening concern, or more precisely, someone's powerful presence that overwhelmed me, enveloped me, dazing me and lulling me to sleep.

In the morning, I awoke with the first rays of the frightening sun, yet the fear had drained from my mind; it was gone, as if some almighty force had erased it from me. I felt alert and filled with curiosity to explore this new and extraordinary world. I went to the refectory for breakfast, where the Essenes gathered as a ritual. They all seemed somehow lost in thought and in the reigning silence, while I munched on a piece of crumbly, long-ago baked bread with three dried figs, gradually, like a fever, like some kind of happy illness, I was overcome by a longing for knowledge. I was so impatient that my head ached.

However, we had been given the first few days to get to know Qumran and its rich, multilayered uniqueness. We were shown the enormous, amazing reservoirs that filled with rainwater during the wet season. This water, together with the two gurgling springs, lasted the whole year, and when the heat was unbearable, it was even used for irrigation. Flowers had been planted in the courtyards between the sleeping quarters, and they bloomed incessantly in their stunning bright desert colors. This abundance of flowers was a great respite for the eyes and the soul, when after long hours of study you could immerse your fatigue in their fragile, seemingly fantastical beauty.

In Qumran, there were also gardens with juicy and fragrant figs, sweet dates, lemons, oranges, and pomegranates. Most of the Essenes did not eat meat; they took modest meals, and food was not a pleasure for them but a necessity that distracted them from their spiritual efforts to master the secrets of wisdom and to achieve perfection. Meat was eaten only rarely and had to be from an animal with cloven hooves; pork was absolutely forbidden.

At first, I was greatly impressed by the two clean and stone-lined baths, carved out of the nearby cliffs. One of them had hot water, heated in an impressive cauldron near the entrance, and the other had cold water, which, in the scorching heat, served not only to maintain hygiene but also to provide welcome refreshment. Eventually, my cousin John and I learned to take desert baths with the finest possible sand, rubbing our bodies with it, which not only rewarded us with a rush of blood, but also removed the remains of sweat and oil from our skin, drying it and cleaning it to a shine.

In Qumran, there was a workshop and kiln for firing pots, a mill, a dyeshop, and also a place for minting silver coins. Money, like all property and everything else in Qumran, was shared; it belonged to everyone and was used for purchases,

trading for all kinds of goods, and happily supporting the people in the settlement. The tower made a stunning impression, being a dizzyingly tall three-story building that served as a lookout for the surrounding area during the day and turned into a heavenly sanctuary in the evening, used for studying the stars, their movement, especially their often bizarre nature and their fateful influence on humans. During the seven years I lived and perfected my knowledge in Qumran, I must have spent several hundred sleepless nights there on the roof, with star charts and riddled-filled indices spread out before my eyes.

But the town's most lasting and striking impression was made by the scriptorium, a wide stone building with huge, bright, south-facing windows, and the library. In its seclusion, which had seeped into the very walls, in the quietude filled with silence, hundreds, probably thousands of scrolls and papyri had been carefully arranged, filled with all possible knowledge about the world and man. The scrolls in the library were written mainly in Aramaic, but there were also many copies in Greek, Latin, and Arabic.

I spent many dozens long days in the scriptorium and transcribed thirty-two important manuscripts myself, and the library remained my favorite place. The thick stone walls kept the room cool, the silence pervaded me, rich and elusive like knowledge itself. The second floor of the library not only helped house priceless scrolls, but also served as a reading room. The ancients had given voice to the strange and moving thought that knowledge brings melancholy. Over the years, I became convinced of how true this insight was, precisely because the more a person knows, the less they actually know. Gradually, I sensed that knowledge was as boundless and infinite as the world around us, unfolding before me as bright as the morning light and as hidden and mysterious as the darkness of night. The more I learned, the more I wondered, and most of all, in anxiety and confusion, I wondered about God! Would I ever see Him and touch Him with my knowledge and mind, or at least touch Him with the unconscious within me, with my soul?

Translators

Izidora Angel is a Bulgarian-born memoirist, essayist and literary translator in Chicago. Her writing has appeared in The American Scholar, A Public Space, Astra, Best Literary Translations 2024, Chicago Reader and elsewhere. She's been recognized by the National Endowment for the Arts, English PEN, Art Omi, Bread Loaf and the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation, among others. Her translation of *She Who Remains* by Rene Karabash (Sandorf Passage and Peirene Press, 2026) received a PEN/Heim Translation Fund Grant and the Gulf Coast Prize in Translation. Izidora is completing her debut memoir.

Christopher Buxton is the author of four novels published in Bulgaria by *Znatsi*: *Far from the Danube, The Return, The Devil's Notebook* and *The Curse of Undying Dreams*. His published prose translations include: *Rumen Balabanov's Ragiad* (Dalkey Press, 2013); Izabella Shopova's *East in Eden* (Inkwater Press, 2015); Alek Popov's *Mission London* (edited, Istros 2014); and Kerana Angelova's *The Interior Room* (Accents 2017). He has had four anthologies of translations of classic Bulgarian poetry published, and his work has appeared in various magazines. He regularly translates for the European Prize for Literature and is currently working on *Absolvo te* by 2021 winner Georgi Bardarov. www.christopherbuxton.com

Yana Ellis found her ideal career in her middle years and graduated in 2021 with a merit in her MA in Translation from the University of Bristol. She was shortlisted for the 2022 John Dryden Translation Competition and in the same year was awarded an ALTA Travel Fellowship. She translates fiction and creative non-fiction from Bulgarian and German. Yana is drawn to narratives that explore issues of identity, immigration, and the representation of the 'other'. Her work has appeared in The Trinity journal of Literary translation, No man's Land, The Common, SAND journal, Trafika Europe, Turkoslavia and Words Without Borders. Her first book-length title T*he Wolves of Staro Selo* by Zdravka Evtimova, recipient of a PEN Translates Award, was published by Héloïse Press in March 2025.

Gergana Galabova has a BA in English with Creative Writing from Goldsmiths, University of London, and an MA in Editing and Translation from Sofia University. She's currently doing a PhD in Theory of Literature. Her critical and literary texts have been published in a variety of online and print media, as well as anthologies, the latest being *From Authors and Readers ABOUT BOOKS AND READING*. In 2021 she won the Grand Prize at the 43rd National Student Literary Competition Boyan Penev and in 2022 her debut short story anthology *Water for Gazing* was published. Her first full-length literary translation (English-Bulgarian) was published in 2024—*The Hearing Trumpet* by Leonora Carrington. She's the editor-in-chief of the online cultural edition artakcia.bg.

Angela Rodel is a literary translator who holds degrees from Yale and UCLA. Her translations have appeared in *McSweeney's, Two Lines*, *Ploughshares, Words Without Borders*, etc. She has received NEA and PEN translation grants; nine novels in her translation have been published in the US and UK. Her translation of Georgi Gospodinov's *Physics of Sorrow* won the 2016 AATSEEL Prize for Literary Translation, and was shortlisted for the 2016 PEN Translation Prize and ALTA's 2016 Translation Award. Her translation of Georgi Gospodinov's novel *Time Shelter* won the 2023 International Booker Prize.

Traci Speed works as a translator and teaches Bulgarian-English translation at Sofia University, though she is currently teaching Bulgarian at the University of Szeged in Hungary, through the Bulgarian Ministry of Education. She has a PhD in Slavic Linguistics from the University of California, Berkeley, where she focused on South Slavic languages, language contact, and the Balkan Sprachbund. She made a permanent move to Bulgaria in 2017, after spending six months in the town of Shumen on a Fulbright grant to carry out sociolinguistic research. She translates both fiction and non-fiction, academic publications, and art museum exhibition catalogues. Her translation of Alek Popov's *Mission: Turan* was published in 2024 by CEEOL Publishers.

Desislava Toncheva is a translator and senior editor in the English Service Department of the Bulgarian News Agency (BTA). There, she translates, edits, compiles and writes news articles and press reviews about Bulgarian politics, economy and culture in English for foreign readers. She is also a clinical psychologist with her own psychotherapy practice on the side, often working with foreign clients and participating in international trainings and conferences. She has compiled, translated and adapted a *Gestalt Therapy Terms Dictionary* in Bulgarian. In fact, she discovered her passion for translation when she was studying to be a therapist and helped out with translating lectures by foreign trainers, which inspired her to get her MA in Translation and Editing from Sofia University. She still often translates psychology-related events. Toncheva feels that both of her career paths complement each other perfectly, as in essence both are about the support of understanding and communication.

Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2024

Catalogue edited by Svetlozar Zhelev
Translation by Traci Speed, Marina Stefanova, Petya Pavlova, Yana Ellis, Rumen Pavlov, Jessica Morris-Ivanova, Dilyana Kodjamanova, Rosalia Ignatova, Christopher Buxton, Miroslav Penkov, Ekaterina Petrova
Proofreading and editing by Traci Speed
Cover and book design by Damyan Damyanov

Printed in Bulgaria
Published by the **National Book Centre**,
National Palace of Culture – Congress Centre Sofia 2024
www.ndk.bg www.nbc.bg
1 Bulgaria Square, Sofia 1000,Bulgaria
www.ndk.bg nbc@ndk.bg
phone: +359 2 9166411