

Contemporary
Bulgarian
Prose
2016



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Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2016



NATIONAL
PALACE OF CULTURE
CONGRESS CENTRE
SOFIA



NATIONAL
BOOK CENTRE

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CHRISTOPHER BUXTON

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Miroslav Borshosh

Dear publishers and future friends of Bulgarian literature,

It is my pleasure to present to you the catalogue *Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2016*. This is our third catalogue, containing 28 of the most established authors and their interesting works. The collection represents a cross-section of what is happening in the field of contemporary Bulgarian prose over the last year. The project is remarkable because it brings together some of the most distinctive authors and books on absolutely equal footing.

Since 2015 we have published an annual catalogue of the best books by Bulgarian contemporary writers, recommended by the Centre. It was the first step in our strategy to promote the best of Bulgarian literature. This year we published a new catalogue: *Children's Books from Bulgaria: Contemporary Writers and Artists* – the catalogue is a guide, a presentation and an overview of contemporary artists in the field of children's and adult literature and their works for Bulgarian and foreign readers, publishers and all guests who are interested in our book market.

The National Book Centre has a mission to support the publishing, promotion and realization of Bulgarian literature at home and throughout the world. It helps publishers,

authors and their works to be accessible to everyone. One of our fundamental aims is to support the translation of more and more Bulgarian books into foreign languages. As of now we have supported more than 40 projects, nine of them are translations of the following Bulgarian books:

1. *18% Grey*, Zachary Karabashliev, Publishing house: HEHA COM, Croatia. Translator: Ksenija Banovic
2. *Mothers*, Teodora Dimova, Publishing house: Nakladatelství Petr Štengl, Czech Republic. Translator: David Bernstein
3. *The Dilettante*, Tchavdar Moutafov, Publishing house: Editionsle Soupirlail, France. Translator: Krassimir Kavaldjiev
4. *The Cem Affair*, Vera Mutaftchieva, Publishing house: Sandorf Publishing, Croatia. Translator: Ksenija Banovic
5. *Alcibiades the Great*, Vera Mutaftchieva, Publishing house: Sandorf Publishing, Croatia. Translator: Ksenija Banovic
6. *Always the Night*, Todor Todorov, Publishing house: Gröbenwahn Verlag Frankfurt am Main, Germany. Translator: Elvira Bormann-Nassonowa
7. *All Turned Moon*, Georgi Gospodinov, Publishing house: Geopoetika Publishing, Serbia. Translator: Maria Giovanna Stojadinovic
8. *Concerto for a Sentence*, Emiliya Dvoryanova, Publishing house: Dalkey Archive Press, UK. Translator: Elitza Kotzeva
9. *Insanity*, Kalin Terzijski Publishing house: INK PRESS, Germany. Translator: Viktoria Dimitrova Popova

Miroslav Borshosh

*Executive Director National Palace
of Culture – Congress Centre Sofia*

THE NATIONAL PALACE OF CULTURE (NPC) – THE LARGEST MULTIFUNCTIONAL COMPLEX IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

The National Palace of Culture (NPC) was opened in 1981 on the occasion of the 1300th anniversary of the Bulgarian state. The architects of the main building are Alexander Barov and Ivan Kanazirev, while Atanas Agura is the architect behind the surrounding areas. During the 1990s, immediately following the change of the political system in the country, NPC lost a significant portion of its property, including infrastructure, commercial areas and car parks. Since 2011, NPC has been restructured into a commercial company, but it remains state property. It is self-sustainable and does not receive any subsidies. The first public financial report of the Palace was released in 2012. A substantial part of the revenues are annually invested in new projects and its own cultural events.

The Festival and Congress Centre (FCC) is the Varna branch of NPC. It was founded in 1986 and it is gradually becoming the center of some of the most prestigious events in the field of art and culture. FCC is host to artistic events and festivals, scientific meetings, seminars and more. FCC is the face of Bulgaria when it comes to prestigious international congress organizations such as ICCA, EFCT, AIPC and is included in the only pan-European network of cinemas, Europe Cinema, in the European Union (EU).

The total available area in NPC is 123,000 square meters, spread over eight floors, four panoramic terraces and three underground levels. The palace also has 12 multifunctional halls with capacities ranging from 50 to 4,000 seats. Each of the halls was designed with its own signature appearance, maintained to this day.

NPC also has 54 more offices and small conference rooms, along with 17,000 square meters of lobbies suitable for exhibition spaces as well as five restaurants and catering companies located within the complex.

The building of the Palace has full-service professional conference teams, who aid in preparing and implementing events, as well as sound systems, lighting, booths for simultaneous translation, TVs and recording equipment, stage equipment, sets and exhibition structures.

A new Press Club was recently opened at NPC, which already ranks among the most desirable venues for events and media events in Sofia. The Press Club is located in a spacious hall with 60 seats, and features modern technology and a team of professionals with vast experience who provide the highest standard of service. These are the main benefits of the Press Club, which make for successful conferences, seminars, trainings, business meetings, lectures and presentations.

One additional new space in the building of the Palace is the „New Theatre – NPC,“ which features an auditorium with 160 seats. The new theater space in Sofia was opened on March 9, 2015, and offers the audience provocative performances of various genres. Interesting chamber performances by state and municipal theaters, performances of private troupes, debuts of young artists are also regular features in the program. During intermissions, the audience can enjoy a glass of wine, while in the lobby guests can find a library filled with dramaturgy. Every Saturday and Sunday children can enjoy puppet shows.

Annually, NPC is host to over 300 events such as international conventions, political forums, business conferences, scientific symposiums, music and film festivals, concerts, dance performances, theatre, exhibitions and fairs. There are more than one million visitors per year.

Prominent performers on NPC's stages have included the Bolshoi Theatre, Teatro alla Scala, S. M. Kirov Academic Leningrad Theater of Opera and Ballet, London Symphony Orchestra, St. Petersburg Symphony Orchestra, Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, Vienna State Opera, Royal Swedish Ballet, the British Royal Ballet, Spanish National Ballet, conductors such as Herbert von Karajan, Claudio Abbado, Riccardo Muti, David Giménez Carreras, Emil Tabakov, Rossen Milanov, Naiden Todorov, Metodi Matakiev, guest performers and groups such as Andrea Bocelli, José Carreras, Nikolay Gayrov, Gena Dimitrov, Montserrat Caballé, Uriah Heep, Mezzoforte, Al Bano and Romina Power, Omara Portuondo, Ibrahim Ferrer and Buena Vista Social Club, Sting, Paco de Lucía, Chris de Burgh, Joe Cocker, James Brown, Goran Bregovic, Anna Tomova-Sintova, Mark Knopfler, Giya Kancheli, Yuri Bashmet, The Mystery of Bulgarian Voices, Hugh Laurie and others, dance and show performances such as Michael Flatley's "Lord of the Dance", The Fire of Anatolia, Night of the Sultans, Shaman, David Copperfield, Cirque Éloize and others, art exhibitions such as Joan Miró – artworks, Oscar Tusquets Blanca - Design, Vladimir Dimitrov - The Master, Stoyan Iliev, National Art Gallery and others.

THE NATIONAL BOOK CENTRE was founded in the beginning of 2015 under the auspices of the National Palace of Culture. The National Book Centre was created to aid Bulgarian literature through translation and popularization abroad. It an heir of sorts to the mission of the former State Book Centre, which was closed. The director of the National Book Centre is Svetlozar Zhelev. The idea is for the centre to interact with state institutions, universities, schools and others, without usurping the functions of the state. The National Book Centre in Sofia was established with the help of the Ministry of Culture and is supported by the Bulgarian Book Association.

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

On our page on the internet site www.ndk.bg you can find our catalogues and also more information about translators, writers and their most interesting projects.

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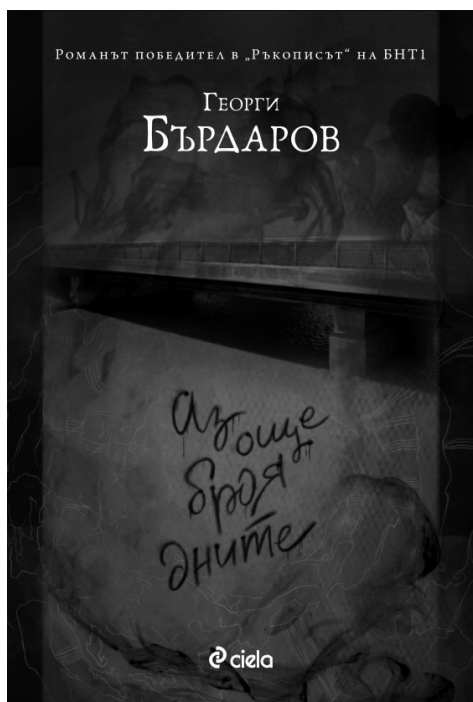


Georgi *B*ARDAROV

has been a favourite among readers ever since his short story “Of the Fifth Rakia or How Beautiful Life Is” became one of the most shared texts on social media three years ago. In his new novel *I’m Still Counting the Days*, he addresses one of the most traumatic periods in the history of the Balkans – the bloody ethno-religious war in Sarajevo. The story of a personal tragedy is set against the backdrop of the siege of Sarajevo in 1993 – Davor and Ayda, a Christian and a Muslim respectively, have to find a way to stay together at times when former friends and neighbours turn against each other.

The story of Davor and Ayda has been inspired by real events – the tragic fate of Admira Ismić and Boško Brkić, who the press later called the “Romeo and Juliet of Sarajevo”. On May 19, 1993, Davor and Ayda make plans to escape the besieged city by crossing the Vrbanja Bridge. The story of the couple’s love and life unfolds against the background of the horrifying hours they spend waiting for the right moment to escape – the snipers’ thirty-minute break. A story so similar to all other Sarajevo stories, but so different with the power of the human spirit. A spirit immortalizing love. There is another story running parallel to theirs – that of a Bulgarian university lecturer going to modern-day Sarajevo to meet the translator of his book. They start talking about the war and some old memories come to the surface. The night of Davor and Ayda’s escape turns out to be fateful not only for them, but also for the two men twenty years later.

Georgi Bardarov is a university lecturer in geography, a member of the board of the Bulgarian Petanque Federation, and a writer. *I'm Still Counting the Days* won the TV format “The Manuscript” – the first Bulgarian reality show for writers, broadcast by the Bulgarian National Television.



4:43 p.m.

Excerpt / Translated by Kalina Todorova

Even in these moments she could keep a cool head. He was sitting at the table, leaning on its edge, with his eyes fixed on her. His whole body was throbbing with anxiety. The candlelight was dancing in the draught coming in through the door gaps and some spooky shadows were playing on the ceiling. She took off her slippers, drew the stool up and climbed atop it in her bare feet. She reached out to put the sugar jar in the top kitchen cabinet. Everything had to look as usual. No one ought to be able tell. Their success depended on this to a great extent. He sighed – he wanted her. He watched her getting down from the stool with one swift, supple movement. Their eyes locked. There was fear in their gazes. They smiled.

The clock on the wall struck 5 p.m. There were four hours left, only four hours. Outside, the city had grown strangely quiet. This city, once so beautiful and bustling with life. Sarajevo! Just now, when the electricity was back on, he couldn't help but turn on the cassette player. The much-beloved tune filled the silence. "Sarajevo, Sarajevo, gdje je moja raja, gdje je moja raja'," Neda was singing. Neda Ukraden. Like in those peaceful and quiet spring nights filled with the scent of jasmine. Now it was spring again. It was May. The best month of the year, but no one was singing, there was not even a trace of jasmine in the air. The putrid stench of death and decay was piling up. Dead bodies, excrement, human entrails and a sense of despair. Davor had smiled at the thought of the song. There were so many songs about Sarajevo, but Neda's was certainly the best.

He closed his eyes and remembered one of her best videos. Neda, in a convertible, driving into the city from Kurshum Mosque, her scarf fluttering in the wind, her voice resounding: "Sarajevo, Sarajevo, gdje je moja raja, gdje je moja raja!" He remembered them on the bus, entering Sarajevo, after the summer work camp in 1988. It was Neda's song again, playing on the radio. The whole class was up in their seats, roaring: "Sarajevo, Sarajevo, gdje je moja raja, gdje je moja raja!" And while everybody was singing, Davor leaned down and kissed her. A clumsy kiss, yet long and passionate. At first she stiffened, but then he felt her soften in his embrace. No, it wasn't their first kiss, the first one had been some time before.

*"Sarajevo, Sarajevo, where is my paradise, where is my paradise"

He startled and opened his eyes. Ayda was sitting on one of the wooden kitchen chairs opposite him, her back straight. Her legs were pressed tightly together, her hands tucked under her thighs, her eyes half-closed. She put a stray strand of hair behind her ear with that gesture which was so typical of her. She did it whenever she was nervous or thoughtful. Her body showed determination and weakness. She hardly had any strength left. Two years of living in this hell. Two years of fearing death every day. Two years of not having a single peaceful night. This had to be over soon. Only four more hours of racking uncertainty and then...total uncertainty.

Outside in the street, a trolley rattled, a dog barked; the first shots that night echoed somewhere in the distance. For a second, everything went quiet, unusually quiet. The only sounds to be heard were the clock, the purring of the fridge and their own heartbeats. Then a shell fell really close by. The windows shook. The candle almost went out, as if its flame dwindled with fear, reaching the ends of the wicks. Davor and Ayda glanced at each other. There were no smiles any more. In wartime faces look drawn with horror, dark circles sag under the eyes, gazes fill with deep anxiety. Women's screams came from the place where the shell had fallen, together with the wail of an ambulance siren. The usual sounds of Sarajevo for more than two years now.



Chavdar CENOV

was born on March 24, 1956, in Sofia. He graduated from the Ninth French Language School Alphonse de Lamartine and has a degree in Bulgarian Studies from Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. He has worked as a teacher in Bulgarian and Bulgarian literature, as an editor in *Literary Forum* newspaper, as a proofreader and reporter in daily newspapers. Cenov has also worked at the National Institute for Monuments of Culture and in Lodos Publishing House. He has also been the head of a department and director of a directory in the public administration; a coordinator for Comprehensible Bulgaria — a joint project between the Ministry of Public Administration and the Institute for Bulgarian Language at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences for writing Bulgarian proper names with Latin letters. The project has led to the adoption of the *Transliteration Law* by the National Assembly.

Cenov has translated from French works by Émile Durkheim, Simone Weil, Jacques Attali and others. He has been a screenwriter for the Polish series *The Deep End*. The series has won awards at several prestigious festivals: the Hugo TV Award in Chicago, the Prix Italia in Turin and the special Prix Europa in Berlin.

Chavdar Cenov is author of the composition *The Drowned Fish*, the short story collections *Dirt Under Fingernails*, *The Strausses of Waltz* and *The Other Door* (translated and published in Macedonia in 2011), the novel *Dogs under Carbon Paper* (nominated for the National Literary Award for Novel

of the Year 2011-2012 and the Helikon Award) and of the collection of novellas *Deviations in Autumn*, which has been nominated for the Elias Canetti Award, the Peroto Award, the Helikon Award and for which Cenov received the Hirsto G. Danov Award for 2015. Short stories by Cenov have been translated into Hungarian, German, Spanish and Macedonian.

B i b l i o g r a p h y

Dirt under the Nails, a short story collection, Sofia, Avtor&Priateli Publishing, 1992, 142 p.

The Drowned Fish, a composition, Sofia, Stigmati Publishing House, 1999 (backed by the Soros Center for Contemporary Art), 112 p.

The Strausses of Waltz, a short story collection, Sofia, Stigmati Publishing House, 2001 (backed by the Ministry of Culture and the Soros Center for Contemporary Art), 160 p.

The Other Door, a short story collection, Sofia, Riva Publishing, 2009, 176 p.

Dogs under Carbon Paper, a novel, Sofia, Riva Publishing, 2012, 280 p.

Deviations in Autumn, a collection of novelettes, Plovdiv, Janet 45 Publishing, 2015, 232 p.



Off the Route

Excerpt / Translated by Irina Ivanova

The really bad thing turned out to be something else — perhaps he had been turning his head too quickly and too often, because at one point the directions got mixed up and it was no longer clear which way was backwards and which way was forwards. If a little while ago he didn't see *behind* himself, now he could only see *in front of* himself at certain moments. Just like the lighthouse which sends out a flash and then goes dark, so the picture in front of him appeared only for an instant, then disappeared and on top of that the length of the flashes decreased at the expense of the length of darkness. What had the neurologist told him exactly — to avoid turning around abruptly. And he had swamped him with examples of tragic abrupt turnings...

During one of the flashes Vatsev caught sight of an arcade and without much thought, rushed inside. He expected if not some bustle, if not the endless rush of people flowing in shopping malls, then at least that there would be on hand some little fellow, a decent one, if possible. A shop somewhere, a café with a table, a little workshop perhaps? OK, if there wasn't one, so it was meant to be and that was that, but there could at least be some worker replacing a cable or a resident with a garbage bag shuffling his slippers. But no, there was nothing and no one. There wasn't even a front door that one could try to enter. Only two parked cars and a high fence to the neighboring yard. The lower part of the fence, around a meter and a half high, appeared to him to be made of stones, the upper part was iron railings. There was neither time nor opportunity to examine it. Vatsev caught hold of the railings, tried to push himself up and to get on the stone ledge and he would have managed to do it if it weren't for the first evil and fierce dog which drove his teeth into his ankle. The blood and the pain poured out simultaneously, the blood — on the outside, the pain — in his remaining consciousness.

Vatsev cried out, turned around and began to kick. The dogs were biting him but certainly he got some kicks in, too, because from time to time they squealed and, if only for a moment, jumped back. He couldn't be sure, he couldn't see well, the sweat was blinding him, too, but he screamed and screamed, he heard the ripping of his trousers, then again his own screams: help, police, is there anybody, can you hear me, I'm dying. Apparently he hit one of them right in the

muzzle, it howled as if it were dying, and he kept on kicking at random, then became aware of some other movement around and all of a sudden everything went quiet, space felt light, it thinned out and Vatsev slipped to the ground.

There were voices, he tried to get up but he couldn't; he was told to lie down without moving; someone tucked something soft under his head; perhaps he had gotten carried away or had lost consciousness for a while, because in the very next moment he felt a sharp sting in the wounds on his legs; he opened his eyes and saw clearly that a man in a white coat was disinfecting and binding them up. There was a stretcher lying off to the side, and somewhere there several people (one of them in his slippers and holding a garbage bag, just like the one he had expected to see when he had rushed into the arcade) were talking about the municipality and the stray dogs. A woman (stout, freckled, with thinning hair) with two children passed by, the children turned their heads as much as they could, staring at him, while the woman was pushing them to the entrance of the building, which turned out to be meters away from the fence, right under his nose, but Vatsev, in the commotion, simply hadn't seen it: "Come on, faster, go in for lunch! I told you to stop turning around!"

Before moving him into the ambulance, they gave him two shots; after the stretcher was lifted all his strength drained away; his head was spinning, everything was a mess. He felt that he would lose consciousness, he made an effort to remain awake without knowing why this would be necessary. Apparently he managed to do it because he somehow calmly remembered that at least he would not have to lie about taking sick leave. He had a right to it — he was wounded for real. The bad thing was that he didn't make it to the house with the birds, he thought and started repeating aloud the names of its inhabitants, as if he were taking leave of the possibility of ever seeing them:

"Capolins, taravels, golitses, besmills..."

The repetition carried him away but only for a second. Vatsev startled and made a decision — he would listen to his GP, he would see an eye doctor. Not only did he make a decision, but he already saw Tanya throwing on her white coat. Tanya herself — as she was — they were in the third grade, but at the same time she had her beautiful legs of today. (The picture of Tanya and her beautiful legs of today turned out to be more painful than the dog bites, but Vatsev clenched his teeth and refused to chase it away). She asked him to sit in front of the machine and started peeping into his eyes carefully, every time hesitating whether to say something, but not say anything and continuing to peep into his eyes again and again, then she took out some drawings and started

pointing at them, asking him what he saw in them in order to determine the prescription, to check if he had astigmatism or sightlessness. He had difficulty distinguishing the drawings, the lines of the figures moved and merged, the colors faded and melted; Tanya was telling him in vain what they showed. *Your evening*, she said, *Your day*, she pointed to the next, *Last year*, *Between 35 and 45*, she went on, and he was squirming with terror — in the drawings there was nothing, nothing, nothing...

Then they closed the doors and the sirens blared. The ambulance carefully squeezed through the arcade, almost stopped when it went off the sidewalk, turned right and only then accelerated.

Vatsev propped himself up on his elbows in the stretcher and started looking out of the window. Something caught his attention, at first he didn't get what it was, he wrinkled his brow, tried to concentrate but before doing this it had already dawned on him. Thus propped up on his elbows, he was with his face turned backwards and what was more... he could see.

Well, yes, he saw everything — buildings, trees, pedestrians and shop-windows moving outside the window. Huge circles of fallen plaster, decayed knots of trees, unwashed shop-window. A noisy bunch of teenagers. One of the boys was talking and everyone else was chuckling...

The ambulance quickly gathered speed, the surrounding landscape blurred and merged into colorful bands trembling and thinning at the back. Vatsev lay down on his back. "I can see because this is *backwards* for the ambulance, not for me. It is moving too fast, I'm seeing its *backwards* and its *backwards* is like its *forwards*, the two are merged into one and the same thing. While this one and the same thing moves outside, inside blood runs out, people die... But why should it be different with me?"

He couldn't think of an answer, the ambulance turned more sharply than it normally did and rocked him to one side. Brakes screeched, there was a loud bang, someone screamed with fear, the ambulance rocked him again — this time to the other side; at the same moment it spun around its axis: once, twice, three times, more and more fiercely until its back end slammed into some shop window thus tossing him somewhere backwards, which had become forwards in the meanwhile. There were shattered pieces of glass everywhere, the doors gaped open and Vatsev flew out with the stretcher. He closed his eyes, expecting a blow. But there was none. He felt himself light, almost swimming in airless space. He opened his eyes and froze with terror — forwards, backwards, around, everywhere, and more precisely nowhere, there was nothing.



Alexander CHAKAROV

was born in Varna. He graduated with flying colors in art theory from the Higher Institute of Theatre Art Krastyo Sarafov and this undoubtedly had impact on the dramatic structure of his writing, which also carries the distinguishing features of the Bulgarian way of thinking and conception of the world. Everything Bulgarian rules the mind, the heart and the actions of his brave, passionate and proud characters, who stand for themselves and their cause.

“I adore Haitov. He is my teacher in the art of writing,” Alexander Chakarov admits. “Come on — help, hold it, carry it...” he told me at our last meeting. “His quill is like Prince Marko’s mace, I don’t know whether I will have the strength to lift it...” Alexander Chakarov received the Hartley-Merrill International Screenwriting Award (Hollywood) for the script of the TV novella *Wrestlers*. The writer also received international recognition when he was included together with Nikolai Haitov and Yordan Radichkov in *Bulgarische Erzählungen Des 20 Jahrhunderts* (an anthology of short stories compiled by the prominent translator from Bulgarian to German Norbert Randow).

B i b l i o g r a p h y

In addition to the short story collection *Bloody Tales*, Alexander Chakarov has also written the novels *The Harem of a Student* and *The Eternal Bulgarian*. He is author of the plays *Bury Me in the Sky* and *Granny Tonka's Pension* and the screenplay *The Root of the Crown*.

A NEW EDITION OF ALEXANDER CHAKAROV'S BLOODY TALES

Traditionally, Ciela Publishing House preserves and encourages Bulgarian literature by forging a path for new authors and by restoring the brilliance of books, which are already considered classics. This is exactly the case with the second edition of Bloody Tales by Alexander Chakarov. Some believe him to be the least popular among the popular writers, but others think his literary power is comparable to that of storytellers such as Nikolai Haitov, Georgi Bojinov and Milen Ruskov.

The author of *Bloody Tales* has an authentic, distinctive talent which takes us back to the fierce times when rifles boomed and blood was shed. The thirteen short stories by Chakarov are first-person confessions. There are neither complicated metaphors in them, nor refined aesthetic elements. On the contrary. The characters speak clearly and loudly, they speak the tongue of the Balkans — biting and uncompromising; they stop for a while, then start again, they swear. And if initially the cutting dialect hampers the reader, after only a few pages, not only does the eye get used to it, but the soul does, too. *Bloody Tales* is a book about the times when men were men. But here women are characters with unusual force and boiling blood, too.

Only a handful of people know that Nikolai Haitov himself encouraged Chakarov's writing career. His achievements remain almost unnoticed by the wider audience, but now Alexander Chakarov's original and emotionally provocative book gets a chance to establish itself and to become more visible for the younger generation as well. Artist Damyan Damyanov has created the cover for the new printing of the book, thus making it even more gripping.

Bloody Tales by Alexander Chakarov is a game of Russian roulette without empty chambers in the cylinder. In the revolver of Fate are loaded bullet-like stories with devastating force. Each story can brutally tear you apart, scatter you and then gather your remains in a formless heap for a bloody memorial service with rakia and gunpowder.

Peter Delchev

The Lord God's Arnaut Vice

Excerpt / Translated by Irina Ivanova

Put the mastika here and tomorrow — may God give us health and strength — I will take you to the grave. Now everybody knows where the grave is, but I will take you to the place where they shot him. Where voivode Sandanski breathed his last... We knew each other. A heavy soul he had, may he rest in peace... The way you're looking at me... who knows what you make of me: this measly monk — a mere nobody — why on earth would he have known the voivodes? So it is and so it isn't — for I was a priest then but I had no God. I had two six-shooters — here they hung each and every day. They each had three pounds of pearls inlaid in the handles. A rifle that had to be pulled by two oxen I carried all by myself. Twice the man I was — I slaughtered people like sheep. That was long ago — liquor ate that man away. Rakia has no mercy, mind that, but that's not what I wanted to talk about. I see you're listening to the abbot, any minute you'll cry. Green is your heart still, it easily believes things — that's why it is easily lied to, but I will set you straight: he, who was crucified because they took pity on him, knows no pity, he knows not — remember my words. How I pleaded with him, how I swore to him — he knows not. He knows no pity or has no power — it's all the same. Evil is God. At least here, in the Macedonian region, he is evil — but what I'm saying is for a riper mind. When you're young woman alone is your god, and woman has no god — that's why all that god says is a lie.

That peak over there, the bare one — can you see it? That is Ali Botush Mountain. Now they call it Slavyanka. On the other side there's another mountain. Kozhuh. Still further is Nindzhe Forest. The most roguish of all. Then comes Kostur and finally Gramos. It borders on the Arnaut country.

This is where I come from. That's where it all happened.

I was a priest then, my father had been a priest, and my grandfather, and my great grandfather — they all had been priests. That was our stock, a stock of priests. But genuine priests they were, not some money-grubbers. So my grandfather, may he rest in peace, died penniless — he didn't have a single coin set aside. My grandmother — the priest's wife she was but I remember her always in the field. Two kerchiefs she had: one for the workdays, one for the holidays... Is that a priest's wife? My father, Priest Lamby, wouldn't say boo to

a goose. He never brought home even a needle that might have been given as a gift. I, the priest's child, have never eaten shoulder of lamb on Saint George's Day given to us by someone else. People would bring some meat and my father would say: "it's fine, we will also have a lamb slaughtered. It's not as if we won't have it." And at other times he would say: "Brass doesn't see eye to eye with God. Brass is from the Devil." Such a priest he was. His hands were forever cracked from the field and the cattle.

That's what I was told, that's what I saw and when they made me a priest, I started doing just the same. Money from the church I never put in my pocket. Insulting, swearing, beating, being sick with greed: I didn't know what these were. People knew me and almost took me for a saint... I lived my life with a light heart ... until my day came, too... I was to marry.

I chose my bride myself. She wasn't of high standing, poor she was, but we had the most wonderful wedding. However, something else was far more wonderful, for a naked gypsy can throw a wedding too; the wedding was over, but it wasn't over for me. I cared for my bride very much, I didn't let a speck of dust fall on her. I didn't let her go working in the field for over a month. My heart filled with joy when I saw her at the gate waiting for me. In the evening, when I came back, when I let the cattle graze and I saw her in the distance — waiting at the gate but what was more — she was dressed up. In that bridal dress... My heart filled with joy for she had braids as thick as grass-snakes, and their color was neither blonde, nor brown... When the sun was setting, it was red... Just like copper, like thick glowing embers. And two blue eyes she had — they stirred, stabbed like an awl. Half stabbing, half tickling. Beauty — you can't defy it!

It was the best month of my life... It was then that the komitadjis came down the Gramos Mountain, but I had neither heard, nor seen them, because it was harvest time when they trampled over my heaven.

I remember it, it was that black day of the Feast of the Saints Peter and Paul when Kalina insisted on going to the field to reap the harvest and she had it her way. I took her to the field, she lifted the sickle... Heat, sweat, you could barely stand them, but young she was and she felt like singing. And she burst into a song... She wasn't yet sixteen. Since then when I hear a song during harvest time, I see red — you must not stand in my way... She was singing, slashing the ears of wheat, her figure stirred under her clothes — I followed her like mad, I hurled the sheaves like a wrestler — such strength had come to me that I was capable of turning over not the field, but earth itself.

At some point I decided to straighten my back. I looked up and saw it: a horse had waded into the field... A black one — like a devil. Sitting on the horse was Kurdan-Ali — the arnaut. People knew him. They also knew his farm on the other side of the Gramos Mountain.

At the time I knew him to be a good fellow, but I grew stiff among the wheat sheaves. Kalina fell silent, she rose up, too. Like pillars we stood among the wheat sheaves while he nudged the horse and came nearer to us. He was somewhat greasy, all smiles. A tough man he was — but he looked softened up. My heart started beating like crazy, it was ready to burst. And that, at that nerve-wracking moment, was all I could come up with: I started praying to God: “Dear Lord,” I said, “You see everything. I am as pure as tears,” I said. “I have no sins in my soul. Dear Lord, don’t let anything outrageous happen, save your slave from pain and disgrace. Save me, my Lord, for I carry your name and to you I swear.”



That’s how I prayed to him, while that dog reached out his hand from the horse and lightly, as if it were nothing, touched her cheek. Kalina’s face turned crimson. It wasn’t a big deal, he simply touched her — he didn’t even look at me. Then he rushed the horse though the field, while I grabbed the cross from my breast and started kissing it. God saved me, he had heard me. I started rolling in the wheat, I went crazy with joy. When I calmed down, I saw that Kalina stood motionless, the sickle hanging from her hand. She looked the same, but her eyes were different. I saw them but I didn’t see them. I was kissing God’s feet, the Saviour’s feet —and he in that moment had already betrayed me.



Alexander CHOBANOV

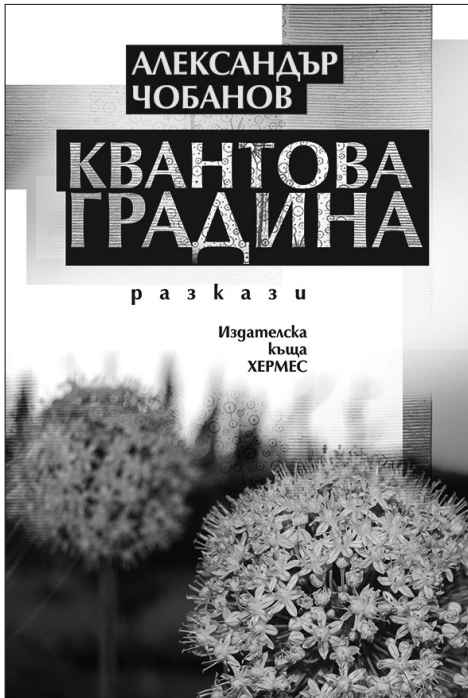
was born in the Bulgarian town of Smolyan on September 26, 1979. He holds a BA in Bulgarian Philology from South-West University Neofit Rilski, Blagoevgrad, an MA in Creative Writing from Sofia University and an MA in American and British Studies from New Bulgarian University, Sofia.

He has worked as a writer on several Bulgarian TV shows and series including *Pod prikritie* (*Undercover*), *Chetvurta vlast* (*Fourth Power*) and *Durvoto na zhivota* (*The Tree of Life*). He has also written scripts for Fortissimo Familia's children's concerts.

Alexandar Chobanov is currently doing a PhD in Contemporary Bulgarian Literature at the South-West University.

Bibliography

In 2008 Alexandar Chobanov published a collection of short stories entitled *Collection 18* which won the Yuzhna Prolet award for best literary debut of the year. His second short story collection, *Summer Afternoon*, came out in 2011. Chobanov's first novel, *Kids*, was published in 2013 by Hermes Publishers and his third short story collection, *Quantum Garden*, came out in 2015.



QUANTUM GARDEN

People say that every flower has its story. The name of each flower tells its story and when you give that flower to someone you actually give them a story. You give them a snippet of time they've missed or haven't yet reached. In *Quantum Garden* past, present, and future are heaped together... Everything has already happened and is still to come: the name of a girl, getting an F for cheating, knocking over a vase, the stupid scripts, the ladybug, Ventsi and Dalai Lama or Henry David Thoreau and the wild strawberries.

But if you want a beautiful bouquet or garden you can't just combine flowers at random. There are certain principles behind garden making. A garden must be full of flowers that have a common denominator. The common denominator in *Quantum Garden* is hope. It determines what the garden smells like and Alexandar Chobanov's quantum garden gives out the scent of daisies – from cover to cover.

Quantum Garden

Excerpt / Translated by Dessyslava Nikolova

Will-o'-the-wisp

Damali means "beautiful face" in Arabic. Her father insisted on the name but he probably did not realize what destiny would come along with it. Older boys from her school would fall in love with her when she was only twelve or thirteen. She never noticed. She thought of the love letters she received as nothing more than a children's game. When she grew up and found out what it was like to be in love, her many admirers started making her nervous.

Damali grew up to be a beautiful woman who made heads turn as soon as she stepped out onto the street. She would go out only at night because she didn't want to be the object of anyone's attention. Rumor around the town had it that men fell under her spell the minute they looked her in the eye. Damali, for her part, thought the whole situation was ridiculous and would tell her girlfriends that every person was beautiful, but they thought she was mocking them and started shunning her.

And so Damali was always either alone or surrounded by admirers and this made her feel worse and worse. Because she had no girlfriends, she grew even closer to her family, especially to their German shepherd. She constantly thought her beauty was a punishment. A punishment she had to accept and live with.

One day she met a photographer named Daniel who was staying in the seaside town where she lived for a holiday and everything changed. The world was now different but also less predictable. Some local boys had warned Daniel about the beautiful Damali. He had become interested in her story and had decided to try to take a couple of photos of her. Damali agreed on the condition that he wouldn't publish them anywhere.

The following day was incredibly overcast, black clouds rolled in as if from the bottom of the Black Sea, the wind started gathering up the umbrellas from the beach. The day suddenly became a shadow of the night, it was neither light nor dark. The sea turned black, lightning and waves became one over and

over again. People grew anxious and started seeking shelter in their hotels and homes. Bright lights from the sea appeared a couple of meters off shore – it's as if powerful sorcerers were locked in an epic battle and the sea was their battlefield.

Daniel liked to prepare everything he thought a photographer would need for a shoot. His cabin, which had been transformed into a studio, had a big porch overlooking the sea. And inside was a huge bed, two chairs and nothing else. Every time someone opened the door the gale made the white curtains surge like a huge wave and when the door was closed once again they settled down gently and went still once again. The neighboring cabins were empty, their windows opened and shut with a bang and kept track of the wind's movement like a giant metronome. If you became lost in thought for just one second, the bang could make you jump. The only problem with the shoot, Daniel thought, would be the light. There was darkness everywhere because of the raging storm, some cables had come loose and caused a power outage. For a photographer light is more or less everything but under the current circumstances he had been forced to create the necessary conditions because the locals had told him that it was very strange of Damali to say yes to a shoot, she had never agreed to anything like this before. When he asked the people in the local pub about Damali, most of them had laughed in his face. They had even told him that they rarely saw her in town. The old women claimed she was a will-o'-the-wisp, that she gave off a glow when she walked slowly down the street. No man could remain unmoved when she walked past, she was like the wind – everyone felt her presence. What was more interesting was that she never agreed to go out on a date or anything like that. The photographer, however, was set on taking a couple of photos of her. It took him two weeks to get in touch with her...



Ivan DIMITROV

was born in 1983 and has a BA in Bulgarian Philology. In 2011 his play *The Eyes of Others* won the 20th New Drama Contest in Shumen. In 2012 the play in its English translation was included in the program of the hotINK at the LARK festival, New York, and was produced at the New Ohio Theater that September. In 2013 it premiered in Bulgaria on the stage of the National Theater and was nominated for an Askeer award for stage design and costumes. In 2014 Dimitrov was nominated for the Stoyan Kambarev Award and his play *No One's Little Old Ladies* was shortlisted for Theater 199's award for best chamber play. Again in 2014 Dimitrov represented Bulgaria at the Interplay Europe festival for young playwrights. That same year his play *The Alien* premiered on the stage of Vazrazhdane Theater and won Theater Nikola Vaptsarov's award for Best Absurdist Play in 2012. Dimitrov holds many other awards from various poetry and prose competitions. He has one short story collection, *Local Foreigners* (2010), two novels: *Life as a Missing Spoon* (2010) and *Sofia Duet* (2016), as well as a poetry collection, *Poet of a Portrait* (2011).

B i b l i o g r a p h y

Local Foreigners, short story collection, 2010;

Life as a Missing Spoon, novel, 2010;

Poet of a Portrait, poetry collection, 2011;

The Eyes of Others, collection of six plays, 2013.

Sofia Duet

Excerpt / Translated by Dessyslava Nikolova

Sofia today. A year ago writer Yordan Konstantinov was found murdered in a park. He had received multiple threats from Bulgarian nationalists and patriots during his lifetime. A controversial figure, Konstantinov has left behind an unfinished novel about Sofia. Janet-45 went on to publish the piece along with four early short stories by the writer, interviews with his friends and fragments of his diaries. The question of who killed Yordan Konstantinov wedges deeper and deeper into our minds with each page. Each person reading this book can answer in the voice of their own conscience.

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Note from Janet-45 Print and Publishing

"I want to write a book about Sofia. A novel in which one of the main characters will be the city itself. A novel in which the city will communicate with the characters and not be a mere backdrop as is usually the case. I have no explanation why no one has ever done it before. This city deserves it, in spite of everything. It is beautiful and at the same time ugly. And so what?" Yordan Konstantinov said in a television interview merely a year before his sudden and absurd death at the age of only thirty-three.

But this is not the only instance. He talks about this idea of his several more times. If these hints dropped in front of the media were all we had to go by we could probably call into question the truthfulness of his words. Especially considering it is Konstantinov we are talking about. As we well know, the writer was famous for his controversial statements and the noisy public scandals he constantly seemed to get involved in.

We cannot resist the temptation to share the biggest scandal the writer has been involved in. We all remember the incident in question clearly, which is why we will only mention it in passing and let every person recall it for themselves because different people have different memories and we can never be certain that what we remember is what truly happened or merely reflects our attitude toward the event. The situation becomes even more complicated when an event attracts media attention. This is when memories fuse together and as far as Konstantinov's public image is concerned it is fair to say that things are completely confused. But let us go back to the story; words tend to tread a winding path toward the final goal and often even decide to catch a train in the opposite direction.

We are referring, of course, to the time when the writer was asked in a live interview on national television whether at the beginning of his literary career he had considered writing under an alias which would stand out more than the mundane-sounding Yordan Konstantinov. Konstantinov casually replied that he happened to be really fond of his name and had never considered it a holdback of any kind. Yet he admitted that he had thought about publishing under an alias; however, for better or for worse, he had not been able to come up with a suitable one. After an effective pause during which he took a sip of the glass of water set on the glass table in front of him he added that contemporary literature's most important quality is sincerity. "There is no way you can be sincere if you use an alias." He went on to say that some years previously he had considered adding on a second surname. One connected with literature, perhaps. The name of a great author. He admitted that he had seriously considered the name Yordan Vazov Konstantinov for a couple of months.

A few seconds of deafening silence follow during which we cannot help but wonder whether he has lost his mind even though we know that his relationship with a certain part of classic Bulgarian literature, especially Vazov, has been largely strained. Here is an interesting question: what went through the heads of the regular, unsuspecting viewers? Whatever it was, few people expected the interview to go on the way it did: Konstantinov smiles a devilish smile and says that he has given up the option because he thought Vazov a capable but irrelevant writer; that in his opinion *Under the Yoke* was an adventure novel suitable for young adults, a patriotic novel suitable for patriots and nationalists or a novel about national psychology suitable for sociologists and psychologists but not for average readers with a regular taste in literature. "The novel," Konstantinov adds, "was topical at the time it was written. But today it sounds archaic! Both because of its language and its plot!" He admits that Vazov is an author of national importance but goes on to say that that was about it. The presenter is struck dumb by this point but Konstantinov continues, saying that Vazov's works, taken out of their national context, have nothing impressive to offer when it comes to style and cannot surprise the reader in any way. "And good literature must surprise."

Vazov had introduced a number of genres into Bulgarian literature and had excellent knowledge of Bulgarian national psychology; Konstantinov says that he would never think of denying these contributions of his. He was speaking purely in literary terms, of course. As an average contemporary writer he felt at a disadvantage because every writer was compared with their predecessors. As

a Bulgarian author he hated being part of a list of names at the head of which most Bulgarians saw that of Vazov's.

"Nowadays Vazov is hopelessly old-fashioned. The best in Bulgarian literature is yet to come. It will be supranational. Fuck (there is no time to bleep it out) what they teach you at school. Read more contemporary literature. It is written for you, just as *Under the Yoke* was written for readers from a specific historical period. Contemporary literature speaks in your language, deals with the issues that are relevant to you. Literature, and art in general, is linked to its own time. Today we are so busy extolling the classics that we completely forget contemporary literature. So throw *Under the Yoke* out the window, burn it or tear it to pieces and if you still want to read something, pick up a contemporary Bulgarian book. It is easy to say that quality contemporary literature does not exist when you are not familiar with it. If you are going to renounce it and say you don't like it, read ten books first. Don't form an opinion on the basis of one! If you don't have time for ten, read five, read three. But choose carefully, every reader must select the books that match their needs. I believe contemporary Bulgarian literature can meet the requirements of any reader who dares approach it with no prejudices in mind." And this is how the interview ends.

But the interview is only the beginning of a story, the details of which we will spare you. It is useless to go back to the public response to the interview, how the critics and the literature teachers tore him apart, how the director of the National History Museum called the writer *anti-Bulgarian* and suggested stripping him of his Bulgarian citizenship, how, over the course of weeks, even months, Konstantinov received anonymous death threats from Bulgarian nationalists who would promise to stab him, shoot him, hang him or cut off his tongue for what he had said about Vazov while more inventive minds kept coming up with ideas on how to go about his public execution.

We are aware that the writer's image is incomplete in the eyes of most readers, that it is comprised of a few sketchy outlines that we would only like to highlight by giving a few biographical details: divorced parents, a child torn between the figure of the father and that of the mother, a short stay at university that ended with him leaving, a long period during which he earned a living doing odd jobs while trying to write and publish, the six "lost" years during which there are entire months with no or almost no information about him, as well as the ten years that followed, marked by impressive creative élan that ended with his murder, the long lawsuit and the media interest it generated for months afterward. Listing events like these is unlikely to shed light on his

controversial character. If we merely list facts without setting them in order, thinking them through and discussing them thoroughly we cannot claim that we have reached a deeper understanding.

Let us go back to the Sofia novel. We hear about it not only from the media but from the writer's friends as well. Poet Ivan Dimitrov testifies to the existence of such a project; he is an important figure because he has known Konstantinov since they were both at university together. He remembers that even at Sofia University (where Yordan Konstantinov studied Bulgarian Philology and Ivan Dimitrov studied Sociology) Konstantinov would speak about his controversial feelings towards Sofia many times. The unrealized idea for a poem about Sofia, which appears in one of the short stories that the current novel is stitched up of, dates back to around this time.

Ivan Dimitrov claims that Konstantinov wrote several beginnings for such a novel but he had not been pleased with the results and had destroyed them all. He had seen with his own eyes two yellow pads speckled with notes about its structure, plot and characters. These pads were nowhere to be found and we believe they have either been lost in one of the writer's many moves from one rented room to another or destroyed. We know that he moved house relatively often and that he would leave behind piles of books and discarded manuscripts because of his inability or unwillingness to organize their transportation. He would treat other personal possessions in the same manner: clothes, furniture, photos. Most of the time he would take along only the necessities; he told his friends it gave him a feeling of a clean start, that he was trying to not get attached not only to his possessions but to what he was writing.

Hristo Mihaylov, a fellow writer from his immediate circle, also confirms that the idea for such a novel dates back to his university years. Konstantinov talked with him about the project while the two of them were smoking in the university courtyard before a "Literature of Western Europe" lecture; Konstantinov was extremely enthusiastic about his unwritten novel, he jumped up and down as he spoke and gesticulated so wildly that he spilt his coffee on the Literary Theory professor who happened to be passing by. According to Mihaylov, the professor in question failed the future author of *The Eternal Student Club* for no good reason.

Konstantinov had spoken about his unwritten Sofia novel to many other people whose names we shall not list here.

According to the writer, one of the main problems with carrying out a project like this is the city itself, because it is controversial and difficult to

include as a character in a novel. As we mentioned earlier, Konstantinov had shown his friends fragments of his manuscripts many times even though he never read aloud from them. His friends' opinions about what they read vary considerably. Some find it brilliant, others – utter trash. Some think it is a work of poetry, others see it as pure prose. Some think it is a romance novel, for others is it an example of urban prose, while still others point out that placing it within a single genre is impossible.

Whatever we may try to say about this novel, we can only rely on the mutually exclusive comments of those who had given the manuscripts the once-over at the writer's rented room.

After the death of the writer and the brutal murder that shook the capital and the whole of Bulgaria we, the editors at Janet-45, were allowed access to his personal computer and spent three months systematizing the materials inside. This is how the posthumous short story collection *K: Short Stories about a Short-Story Writer* appeared; the critics unanimously describe it as a novel in short stories. Two new plays were also published and are currently running in the capital. In addition, we are in possession of a second manuscript of a big novel which will be published soon and of manuscripts and notes on five other novels in various stages of completion.

Among the piles of files we found a folder named Sofia Duet containing four early short stories ("Night Man", "A Promise of Summer", "L." and "Thursday Morning"). There is undoubtedly a connection between them that goes beyond the plot. The folder also contains the unfinished first part of a Sofia novel written years later. Here, apart from the short stories you will find several pieces by Hristo Mihaylov, who has been interviewing Konstantinov's friends, acquaintances and people who felt somehow connected to him and his work for the past couple of months. At the end of the book you will find two appendixes: fragments from Konstantinov's notes on his efforts to write the Sofia novel and the poem "Climbing Vitosha Mountain" dedicated to a climb to Kamen Del Peak which is actually where the first – and unfinished – part of the novel about Sofia begins.

The book could easily stand on its own as a short story collection but since the author is no longer with us and it is not possible to ask his opinion, Janet-45 has tasked Ivan Dimitrov with organizing the texts into a complete whole.

Janet-45 Print and Publishing



Anton DONCHEV

was born on September 14, 1930, in Burgas. He started writing poetry when he was a child, but only published his first book in co-authorship at the age of twenty-five. He wrote a sci-fi novella at the age of twelve and a contemporary novel about his life and his classmates at the age of fifteen.

His novel *A Saga for the Time of Samuil* came out in 1961 and received the Novel of the Year Award of the Association of Bulgarian Writers. The book has twelve reprints, in a single volume or in two-volume editions, and so far has sold half a million copies.

Anton Donchev wrote his novel *Time of Parting* in 1963. The book has enjoyed a large number of reprints – more than twenty over the past fifty years, and has sold more than one million copies. It has been translated into thirty-three languages. The number of reviews of the novel, in both Bulgarian and other languages, is significantly larger than the number of its pages.

Since the publication of *Time of Parting*, Anton Donchev has collaborated with cinema and television experts, in order to make viewers around the world familiar with the contribution of Bulgarian people to global issues. Among others, he has worked with Carlo Ponti, Dino De Laurentiis, Paramount Pictures, ICM, Columbia Pictures and Sony Pictures. He has cooperated with world-famous producers, screenwriters and directors from Italy, the USA, France, Germany and Russia in a number of large international film productions about Bulgaria. In 1968 Irving Stone nominated Donchev's novel *Time of*

Parting in its English translation for the Best Historical Novel of the Year Award. The novel was admitted to the competition with a special decision by the jury, because the only authors who had been presented with it at that time were American.

Anton Donchev has written numerous scripts since 1968. Among the most well-known are *The Beginning* – a script about the First Bulgarian Kingdom – and *The Heretics*. Another famous novel of his is *A Story of Khan Asparuh, Royal Prince Slav, and the High Priest Teres*. By 1992 it had been published in a four-volume edition and had sold around 900,000 copies.

In 1998 Donchev wrote his novel *The Strange Knight of the Holy Book*. The book is a revised version of the script *The Heretics*, which has adaptations in five different languages, written in co-operation with foreign experts. The novel has been printed in tens of thousands of copies in Bulgaria and has been translated into ten languages. In 2003 it brought Anton Donchev the literary award Balkanica for the best Balkan novel.

In 2008 his novel *The Three Lives of Krakra* was published in a two-volume edition. It features the serious resistance of the Bulgarians against the Byzantines at the end of the 10th century that lasted for fifty years. It has sold 104,000 copies in paperback and 10,000 in hard cover.

Donchev's latest novel was published in 2016.

Anton Donchev has written several film and TV series scripts, three of them international productions. He has worked as an editor and a screenwriter in Bulgaria, as well as abroad. Among his works there are children's books, numerous short stories, reports and articles, translated into many languages. Donchev has given a number of interviews for Bulgarian and foreign media. There are several books and two documentaries about his life and work.

The project of publishing the complete works of Anton Donchev has been undertaken by Zahari Stoyanov Publishing House. So far they have published twelve volumes.

Anton Donchev has founded two scholarships under the name *Time of Parting* for students of history and Bulgarian literature. They are awarded by the St. Cyril and St. Methodius International Foundation.

Bibliography

Awakening, 1956

A Saga for the Time of Samuil, 1961

Time of Parting, 1963 (It has had 22 editions in Bulgaria and has been translated into 33 languages – English, Italian, German, Swedish, Russian etc.; the film *Time of Violence* based on the novel came out in 1987)

The Nine Faces of Man, 1980

Nicholas Roerich, 1981

A Story of Khan Asparuh, Royal Prince Slav, and the High Priest Teres, 1968 – 1992 published in four volumes

The Strange Knight of the Holy Book, 1998

Legends of the Two Treasures, 1998

The Three Lives of Krakra, 2007

The Shadow of Alexander the Great, 2016

He has also written short stories, articles and film scripts.

The Death of White Evil

Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel

I was slowly waking up. Swaying half-asleep as if rocking on dark waves. I felt myself standing up and opened my eyes. It was night. There were shadows roaming around and somewhere far in front of me, a spot of light was shining like a star. A man's arms helped me to my feet. My right arm barely moved up and wrapped itself around someone's shoulders. A woman's shoulders. Arsinoe. She was supporting me. I pressed my chest to her shoulders. Now I was supporting her. In the night sky that lay in front of me – clear and starlit, a waning moon was hanging low; a dark black-grey hole was gaping right under it. It was huge and round, crowned by a wreath of stars. I realized this was a shadow of a hill, a dark shadow because the moon was setting behind it. The snowy garment of the hill was glittering, lying heavy, as if drenched with darkness. On either side of the road we took there were walls of snow, higher than a man. They, too, were cloaked by the hill's shadow.

A priest was walking in front of us; bareheaded, white-haired, dressed in white or light yellow clothing, he resembled a fine snow sculpture. I couldn't see

his face. He was carrying an unusual torch. It was glowing dimly, like embers in the ash. We were encased by the towering snow. If there was a door, it was open. The stars disappeared; above us there was only darkness.

I could hear footsteps behind us. We were walking along an underground passage, through its chilly, stagnant air. My fingers stirred, my palms were resting on a bear skin. I managed to turn my head and catch sight of Arsinoe, barely visible in the scarce light of the torch's dying ember. Very young and very thin. She was looking ahead.

The door opened. A heavy stone door, there was no creaking, only dragging and hauling. A wave of warmth engulfed us. The torch's ember disappeared, the door closed heavily behind us.

Arsinoe groaned, her shoulders softened, she slowly sat down. I knelt beside her. She tilted up, certainly unconscious.

We had entered an underground cave, some kind of kingdom of shadows. Not large, not bigger than what our eyes could encompass – a wall in front of us, walls on either sides, a dome. In the middle – the dark shadow of an altar, no taller than our waists. It was the only black object in the room that stood still. All the other shadows were trembling like reflections on a watery surface, stirred by a breath of wind.

On a huge slate in front of us, there was a stone bed with a human shadow lying on its back. Three shadows were rising above it, leaning forward, taller than a man's stature.

On our left side, we could see shadows of faraway mountains, one icy peak after the other. Ancient woods stood dark with their huge crooked tree trunks at the foot of the mountains.

On our right side, waves rose and came to a halt the minute before crashing against the shore – a wall of water with a crown of foam.

The dead body and the ghosts above it glowed with a tint of green and yellow. The mountains shone white like the moon, while the woods beneath them were engulfed in brown-black darkness. The halted wave was green like an emerald, sliced clean through the middle.

And silence. Half-darkness, shadows and silence. And the hardly noticeable trembling of the shadows.

I caressed Arsinoe, she was breathing, her head drooping. I let the leather garment slide down to my feet and went up to the stone altar.

I knew that there I would find the candlestick which gave birth and form to this world of shadows. From the entrance of the cave it looked as if the altar

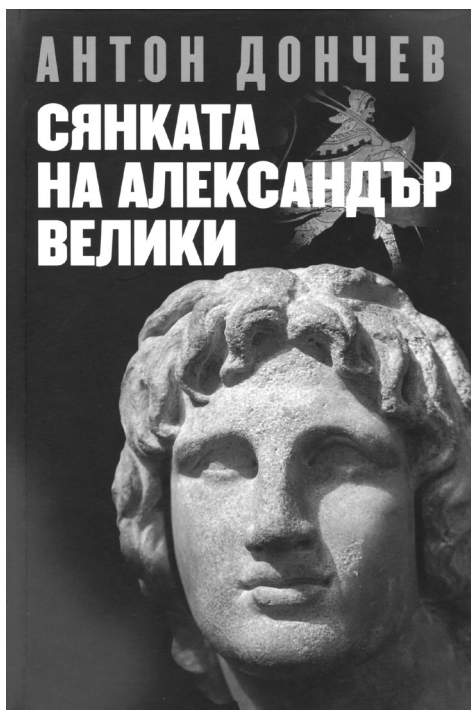
was shutting out the light. I knelt and carefully took down the slivers of nephrite jade surrounding the three burning candle-wicks. Three slivers, surrounding the flames, three slivers, thin like the wings of a big butterfly. It takes great skill to flake the stone so thinly, so that it can become transparent and the light can shine through. The nephrite jade is dappled with veins and spots, from green and yellow to brown and black, beautiful and delicate like a reflection of a different world. If you have a hundred slivers, you can find one with a shadow, resembling a dead person on his back with a ghost above him. You can create mountains, woods and waves.

The slivers touched with the slightest tinkling sound. I lay them down on the floor and put the candlestick on the altar.

I took a look around. There was nothing, not even a bowl of water. I went back to Arsinoe and lifted her head up. She looked at me in a daze and asked: “Was I dreaming?”

I replied: “One day you will go and see the mysteries of Eleusis. If these priests had added a handful of herbs to the candlestick, you would have heard groans and voices. You would have seen the demons of the earth, which turn from snakes into sirens. Everything is asleep here. In Eleusis everything comes and goes, the beautiful becomes hideous, the truth turns into lies.”

Arsinoe said: “We’re not in Eleusis. Where are we?”





Deyan *ENEV*

was born in 1960 in Sofia. He graduated from the First English Language School in Sofia and has a degree in Bulgarian Studies from Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski.

Enev has worked as a painter, a graveyard shift attendant in a psychiatric and surgical ward, a factory worker, and as a teacher. He has worked as a journalist in many newspapers. Enev has over 3,000 journalistic publications – interviews, features, articles, portraits, and feuilletons. He lectures in the creative writing courses organized by the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation. Currently, he is a columnist for Kultura web portal. He is married and has two children. Deyan Enev has more than eighteen published books.

B i b l i o g r a p h y

Short Story Collections

Readings for the Night Train (1987), which received the Yuzhna Prolet Award for debut

Horse Gospel (1992)

Manhunter (1994), which was translated into Norwegian in 1997

The Slaughter of the Rooster (1997)

Heads or Tails (1999, 2000, 2014), which won the Hristo G. Danov National Award for Fiction and the Annual Award of the Union of the Bulgarian Writers

Have Mercy on Us, Oh Lord (2004), which won the Helikon Award for New Bulgarian Fiction

A Town Named Mendocino (2009), which won the Milosh Zypkov National Literary Award and was nominated for the Helikon Award

Seven Christmas Stories (2009)

The Bulgarian Lad from Alaska. Sofia Stories (2011, 2012)

Hemingway's Grandson (2013)

Grizzly (2015)

Maria (2016)

Essay Collections

A Nation of Hesychasts (2010)

The Little Home-Made Church. Modern Parables (2014)

By Law of the Writer (2015)

Portrait Collections

Men of the Pen (2009)

Poetry Collections

Poems (2012), which won the Nikolay Kanchev National Poetry Award

In 2008, the Austrian Publishing House Deuticke released a collection of selected stories under the title *Circus Bulgaria*. The translation into German was done by Norbert Randow and Katrin Zemmrich. The stories were compiled by Dimitar Dinev, who also wrote the afterword.

In August 2010, London-based Portobello Books published *Circus Bulgaria* in English. The book made its way to the longlist of Frank O'Connor, the most prestigious competition for short story collections in English, two years in a row: 2010 and 2011.

GRIZZLY. NEW SHORT STORIES is a collection of 36 short stories which follow the creative quests of its author.

The *Grizzly* short story collection is my seventieth book. It can also serve as a creative writing handbook. After so many books I realized that you can't make a collection of masterpiece short stories only, as we storytellers would all like. That's why I went for the more realistic option again. There are eight very good stories and twenty-eight good stories; half of which – that is, fourteen – are better than the other fourteen. The reader who manages to draw the lines of distinction deserves the stamp of approval for being “a very good reader”. From now on everything is in his hands, including his debut as a writer. For the real aficionados I have also included two poems in prose.

This book is very precious to me. In it, under the grey ashes of age, are still glowing real burning embers.

Deyan Enev

MARIA is a collection of short stories, including two novellas, compiled by Svetlozar Igov, who is the author of the afterword as well.

[...] Deyan Enev is a writer of typical, I would say a Sofia-kind-of sensibility; he even has a book of “Sofia stories” and this undoubtedly enriches Bulgarian literature, whose urbanization has been overdue and slow. His characters, however, are not only people from the city, nor can his fiction be associated solely with the city or Sofia, in particular. And that's not because there are rural stories as well, but because the primary identification of his characters is carried out by other means.

[...] In terms of characters, as well as setting and plot, the stories of Deyan Enev present borderline, interim, transitional and extreme characters, places and situations. The action often takes place in the suburbs and the outskirts, the ghettos of the homeless, on the road and in stations, hospitals, mental hospitals, mortuaries, cemeteries, barracks...

Svetlozar Igov

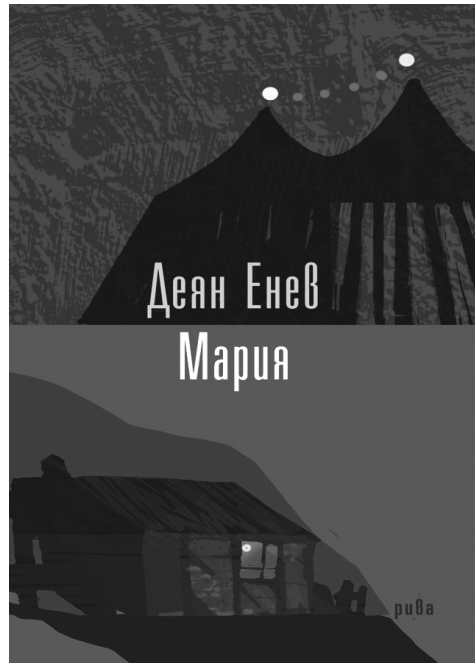
Maria

Translated by Irina Ivanova

While sitting on the bench and feeding buns to the pigeons, Maria suddenly realized that the man on the opposite bench was just then having a severe headache. She looked at him more carefully and saw indeed that he had covered his face with his hands. With a smile on her face, she sent him one beam and then some more. The pigeons flew away abruptly, as if after a gunshot, and perched all together on a small tree and from there fixed upon her their watchful orange eyes. After a few minutes the man dropped his hands from his face and, for the first time in a while, took a look around. Then he got up, tossed his head and with a brisk step went down the alley. Maria made herself more comfortable on the bench and started crushing the bun into crumbs again.

Soon a boy and a girl sat down on the empty bench. The girl was staring fixedly ahead of her with a stony expression on her face. The boy had turned to face her and was telling her something quite heatedly, gesticulating at the same time. His voice was rising higher and higher when suddenly he fell silent and burst into tears.

Maria immediately realized that just then the girl was running late for a meeting, that she had no time for the boy and was only thinking how to get rid of him. Maria smiled, stopped crushing the bun and sent the girl one very powerful beam. The pigeons flew up again and perched in the tree. The girl shuddered, looked furtively at the weeping boy and very slowly and carefully slipped her hand under his T-shirt and stroked his back. The boy lifted his tearful unbelieving eyes—that was what the girl was waiting for. She gave him a lick on the nose, then started laughing, told him something and then kissed him so fiercely that the world went deaf.



After those two left, the bench remained empty for a long time. The pigeons pecked at the last crumbs and flew away. To the south the sky grew dark. A gust of wind whirled the rubbish in the alley. The plastic coffee and Coca-Cola cups rattled like a herd of horses. And then, after a flash of lightning as quick and beautiful as a hieroglyph, heavy rain came pouring down from the sky. Maria lay back on the bench and let the rain fall on her.

In the late afternoon a mother and her little boy walked down the alley. The boy was kicking the leaves which had fallen to the ground after the rain and was jumping in the puddles when his mother wasn't watch him. He stopped next to the bench where Maria had been sitting.

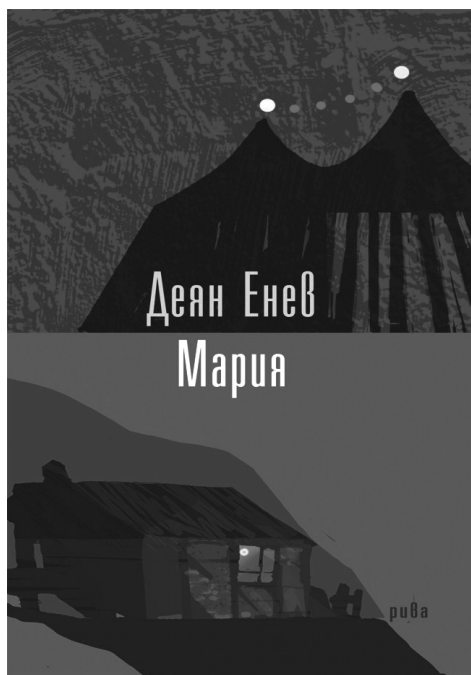
"Mommy, look!" he said after he patted the wet boards. "Maria has been sitting here."

"Maria? Who's that?" his mother asked.

The boy touched the bench one last time and moved on.

"Bobby," his mother said when she caught up with him, "who's that Maria you were talking about just now?"

But Bobby didn't say anything. He had suddenly realized that he could not explain to his mother who Maria was.





Vasil GEORGIEV

was born on July 5, 1975, in Sofia. In 2001 he graduated in law from Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. In 2008 he successfully defended a doctoral thesis in European Union law. He works as a lawyer and as a lecturer at Sofia University and New Bulgarian University.

B i b l i o g r a p h y

Vasil Georgiev's first short story collection — *Buddhist Beach* (2008) — was well accepted by the literary critics who argued that its author was one of the most intriguing short story writers in the last 20 years. His second collection — *Street Dweller. Stories about the Sofia Streets* (2010) — was nominated for the Hristo G. Danov Award for Best Bulgarian Fiction Book in 2010.

In 2011 his third book was published: *Degrad*, another short story collection, which won the Helikon Award. In the spring of 2013 Georgiev's first novel came out — *Apparatus* — a dystopia about consumerist society. The novel was nominated for the Helikon Award. In June 2014 *Apparatus* received the Novel of the Year Award by the National Endowment Fund 13 Centuries of Bulgaria.

In 2016 Hermes published Georgiev's second novel — *Ex Orbita*.

Synopsis

2097

Pempo and Marion get on their bicycles to go and see what's left of the house which belonged to their great-grandparents. In Samograd, at the end of the country, in that isolated region about which one hears nothing, or at least nothing nice.

Marion disappears in the autonomous town and Pempo is abducted by the transmentalists — an organization whose aim is to save humanity by reconnecting man with Reason, which has long been forgotten.

Ex Orbita is an ironic dystopia which has been thrust upon us by contemporary mass culture and politics. At the same time, *Ex Orbita* is an absorbing and dynamic biopunk novel.

And what is “ex orbita” in fact? A state of enlightenment? Of nirvana? A connection with the Supreme power? Which Supreme power — God, the Unconscious or something even more vague? Welcome to the book — it is my intellectual challenge to you.

Vasil Georgiev

Ex Orbita

Excerpt / Translated by Irina Ivanova

Someone had been in the room — the bed was made and on it he saw the note which he had found earlier in front of the entrance and which he had taken with him when leaving for Samograd.

Under it, on another note, was written:

Good morning, dear PempoDaystar!

It was necessary to bring you here. Accept our apologies.

We will compensate for the inconvenience we've caused.

You are in absolute safety.

We found The Tale of the Spiral in your back pocket.

We hope you will help us!

Knock on the door when you're ready.

Thanks!

What was that nonsense about? He hated polite words — most often they were hiding something tricky. And since he was locked in a room with no

window, they sounded even more disturbing.

He quickly put his clothes on. He started thumping impatiently on the wooden door. He heard the shuffling of chairs or a table, then steps and someone pushed the handle of the door down.

He took a step back. The door opened. The artificial yellowish light from the corridor sneaked into the semi-dark room.

On the threshold stood a small, ginger man of around 40 with a beard, dark eyes, regular feminine features, thin lips and almost translucent skin. The face seemed familiar to him.

The space behind the man was taken up by two stocky chavs with short hair and serious, angular, dumb faces who were apparently guarding the ginger man.

“Hey, groper,” the small man’s face twisted in an ironic grimace. “I’m glad you’re fine.”

“What!?” Perplexed, Pempo took a step toward the man, but one of the obtuse-angled thugs got ahead of him and stood between them. “Who are you?”

“I am Strahota. We met yesterday in the bar.”

“I don’t remember anything of the kind! Why am I here?”

“Because of what happened there. The bar is completely destroyed. We escaped by the skin of our teeth.”

He was horror-struck. The bar, the alcohol, the drugs. There were times indeed when he didn’t remember things. Very often actually. Could he have done something spectacularly foolish this time?!

“Have I done something?” he asked nervously.

“No, of course not,” Strahota reassured him.

“Then what?” he raised his eyebrows.

“We don’t have an explanation ourselves. Some invisible, evil power started overturning chairs, uprooting tables and destroying the bar until it smashed everything. Tables, bottles, glasses, speakers! Everything.”

“An invisible, evil power,” Pempo repeated slowly and looked more carefully at the man. He didn’t seem to be kidding. “Where am I?”

“In the Sector.”

“In the mountain?”

“On the Cold Hill.”

“And why’s that?”

“Ten minutes before the havoc you warned us.”

“I did?” The ginger man must have meant some other Pempo.

"You! You told us to leave the bar. You said someone was about to destroy it. We didn't believe you— you were too inebriated and not very persuasive. But in the end it all happened as you said it would happen. And you hid in the shrubs."

Looked at that way, he hadn't done anything bad. He even deserved praise.

"And you locked me up here to thank me?"

"I wouldn't say so," Strahota objected and looked at him inquisitively. "You must tell us what you know."

"Easy as pie. I don't know anything."

"I don't believe you," Strahota was still watching him carefully. "In the ruins we found a poster left on a big sheet of paper. It read: *The road ahead and upwards* and below that was the text of *The Tale of the Spiral*."

"*The Tale of the Spiral*?"

"*The Tale of the Spiral* with which *The Fire Chronograph* ends! You know it, of course. It's about the New Spiritual Man, the one we are waiting for to come from the past in order to go to the future and to climb the spiral to save Reason; and its Fire will take us onwards and upwards on the road to Beauty!" Strahota declaimed.

It was not until then that Pempo remembered why the note he had found in front of the entrance sounded so familiar. One needn't have read *The Fire Chronograph* by the Duchess to know that it ended with the prophecy about the approaching arrival of the New Spiritual Man.

"I found it in the street," Pempo tried to justify himself. "So what?"

He felt the suspicious looks of the man and the guards. But he wasn't to blame. They had no right to keep him here. If he were resolute enough, he would be able to leave. Let's see what they would do. He imagined the breakfast which was waiting for him in the house — the bread from the day before yesterday, the non-perishable cheese and the dried fish would do him good. He would skip the mushrooms — they must have turned into broth in that plastic bag. And water, lots of cold water. He could feel it — how it would pour down his burning throat, wash away the pain in his head and cool his dry guts. His mouth filled with saliva, he smiled and his feet moved on their own accord to the cabinet so that he could take his torch, charger and wallet.

"Well, I'll be leaving then..."

"You don't seem to understand," Strahota took him by the hand.

"Sod off!" Pempo pushed him aside.

"Very well, then. You're leaving. But we need to know what happened. We want you to go into the transmental chamber. You will make contact with Reason! Ex Orbita!"

“Whaaat?” Pempo was almost shouting.

“You will get in touch with Universal Reason!” Strahota repeated slowly. “The capsule will take you to ex-orbita. It will connect your consciousness with Reason!”

“Huh?”

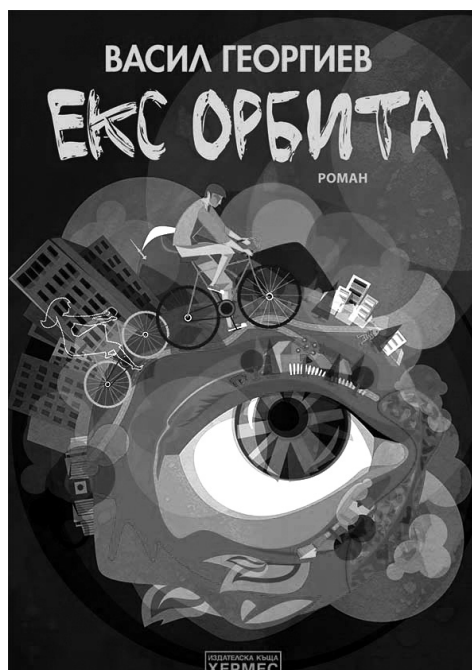
What mess had he gotten himself into? Into something unintelligible, complex and dangerous. And complicated, yes, complicated — there was such a word, he immediately remembered what it meant.

“You will enter the capsule to establish a transmental connection with Reason. Then you can leave.”

“Ooh, no — I will be leaving before that!” Pempo put the torch, the wallet and the charger in the side pocket of his trousers. “I wish you luck, success and whatever else you may need.”

“Well, if you don’t want to...” Strahota said in a resigned tone and made a sign to the thugs. “Catch him!”

Pempo immediately calculated his chances — he had none. He neither had strength to fight back, nor knew where to run to. It was his own fault — if he hadn’t listened to his sister or if he had at least declined the invitation from the stupid cop, he would have been at home at that moment. And there is no place like home — you can lay your old bones down on the mattress with the springs sticking out of it, you can watch the dusty grey sky through the dirty window, you can kick the piles of clothes scattered on the floor... And the moment you poke your head out of your digs, something immediately happens. And then there’s something else because nothing in life comes alone and when you start going downhill, there’s no end to it and just like that you end up in some stinking room, with your arms twisted behind your back; you are tied with a thick rope so that they can do who knows what with you...





Angel IGOV

is the author of two novels: *The Meek* (2015) and *A Short Tale of Shame* (2011), the latter also published in the US by Open Letter. His short stories are gathered in two collections, *Road Encounters* (2002) and *K.* (2006), with some of them translated in French, Polish, Hungarian and other languages. Igov teaches English literature and Translation at Sofia University. He has reviewed books for several newspapers and journals as well as a TV show, and has participated in the juries of several literary awards: Vick (2007), Ivan Nikolov (2009) and Elias Canetti (2013). He has translated in Bulgarian novels by Paul Auster, Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Angela Carter, John Banville, and others, as well as Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*.

B i b l i o g r a p h y :

Meetings on the Road. Sofia: Lodos, 2002

K. Sofia: Adrona, 2006

A Short Tale of Shame. Sofia: Ciela, 2011

The Meek. Plovdiv: Janet-45, 2015

Selected prizes and nominations

- Southern Spring Award for debut book of prose (2003) for *Meetings on the Road*

- Nomination for the Elias Canetti Award for *K.* (2006)
- Winner of competition by Open Letter Publishing and the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation for *A Short Tale of Shame* (2011)
- Nomination for the Helikon Award for *The Meek* (2015)
- Nomination for the Novel of the Year Award by the 13 Centuries of Bulgaria Fund for *The Meek* (2016)

THE MEEK

Synopsis

The novel deals with the historical events surrounding the “People’s Court” in Bulgaria in 1944-45, which was created to try pro-German politicians for war crimes, but which quickly transformed into a tool for organized terror. The narrative flow involves changing points of view: third-person narration alternates with a “chorus” of watchers – young people from a working-class neighborhood – whose ironic attitude sets the novel’s basic tone. The main character, Emil Strezov, is also a working-class young man, yet he is ambitious, a never-quite-graduated college student and a fledgling proletarian poet. He gradually finds his way into the new corridors of power, where two older communists become his mentors and secure him a position as a prosecutor in the People’s Court. Initially driven by the abstract idea of just punishment, Strezov, after a string of events, fixates on the bourgeois poet and bon vivant Shtiliyanov, who becomes the object of his frustration and desire for social revenge. While he grows ever more obsessed, his friends try to lead a normal life, while the girl he is secretly in love with, Liliana, seems to have set her sights on one of his authoritative mentors, Tsenev. The embittered young poet misses his last romantic chance, and in the end also fails in his attempt to win a death sentence for Shtiliyanov. At the very end, Strezov discovers that Tsenev and Liliana are living as man and wife in the apartment the authorities confiscated from his “enemy”; seeing Liliana hanging out her husband’s laundry, the young poet runs off down the street, accompanied by the gaze of the chorus of watchers – “the people around the corners, history’s mooches, the lowly and the unnoticeable, gifted with countless eyes: the meek, who shall inherit the earth.”

The Meek

Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel

In the thick February fog, heavy with the scent of coal, a young man was standing on the bridge by the Yuchbunar baths, tearing pages out of the notebook in his hand and tossing them into the river. When the final page had been carried off by the current, he seemed to hesitate for a moment. Then with sudden determination he tore off the cover as well and tossed it into the dark water, which in places glittered with thin slivers of ice. Without looking down he turned around and quickly set off towards downtown. At that time of the night, there were no other passersby: the streets were snowy and deserted. Here and there, from the yards in the side streets came the listless barking of dogs. The bright breath of the electric street lights on Pirotka was unable to pierce the fog, but hung around the lamp posts like ragged halos. The man's footsteps crunched on the trampled-down snow, which was black from soot and cinders. He didn't meet anyone, and even if he had, his neighbors from Yuchbunar likely would not have recognized him at first.

That was you.

We knew you, Emil Strezov, for months and years we followed your every move; and even though we didn't see you then on that bridge, even in our sleep we knew that you were there. Carried away in their rapid movement, our eyeballs still noticed everything, even behind our closed eyelids: the gray tatters of the fog, the lonely man's footsteps that sprang up in the snow. We saw, we heard. We remembered how you moved to the neighborhood, how you came from that nearby town, so insignificant that its name isn't even worth mentioning, we saw with our own eyes how from a down-and-out high school student you became an underappreciated poet, and then the generous autumn of '44 suddenly thrust into your hands the power to shape human fates. We joked that one day, our children, when they entered that university of yours that you never finished, would come across one of your poems in the thick anthologies, they would read it and say: well, it's not bad. And we would tell them: Emil Strezov, you say? He lived across the street back in the day. If you only knew how I knocked him flat once. And what did he do? The kids would ask. What do you mean, what? He wasn't a hooligan like us. What was he like? He was... He was the little old ladies' darling. He was Uncle Petar's polite tenant, he was always rushing around, with books tucked under his arm until that autumn,

with a pistol tucked in his belt later on, but he always found time to say hello and chat a bit about the great events that had taken place and the even greater ones that were to come. But if any of us had passed you on that night, he surely would have noticed that there was something strange in your gait, in your gaze, in the wrinkles unexpectedly carved into your forehead, which made you look grown-up and furious; that one of us would even have screwed up his face in turn, wondering whether he hadn't mistaken someone else for you and whether that rushed young man was the same person who so fiercely, his face ablaze in a smile, had made the rounds of the Sofia streets in early September.



K



Kostadin KOSTADINOV

was born on November 14, 1960, in Radomir. He graduated from Sofia University in Bulgarian language and literature. He was in charge of the section for culture in the *Student Tribune* and later, in 1990, he founded Pan Publishing House.

His first book of fiction *The Pink Pelicans Reserve* was published in 1991. He has written the scripts for two films: *The Pink Pelicans Reserve* (2003) and *The Legend of the White Wild Boar* (2004).



THE BAY OF IPHIGENIA is a collection of two short stories, two novellas and one short novel.

After a long period of silence, one of the masters of storytelling – Kostadin Kostadinov – has made his literary comeback. His writing resembles the skill of a captain, steering a ship in stormy weather – as if there is nothing easier in this world than sailing into the wind of days, through the sea of courage. The Bay of Iphigenia has found a secure place in the ranks of Bulgarian narrative works, which we will read with genuine pleasure.

Alexander Sekulov

Kostadin Kostadinov's works are permeated with the cozy feeling of home, with human kindness and memories. A candid book, full of light, it follows the best Bulgarian narrative tradition. It is like a fairytale – it can be funny or sad, or painful, but it is always personal. All the short stories and novellas in the book are pieces of time, bits of life, merging into a kaleidoscope of human nature. A book about falling in love, a book full of characters you can love. A book about history and about the stories, both real and magical that occur in our dreams and our everyday life. A book that can save us – from ourselves and from our demons. A book that is warm and pure. A book to be read and shared.

Svetlozar Zhelev

The Last Soldier Emperor

Excerpt / Translated by Kalina Todorova

I felt dizzy, as if I had overdone it on homemade brandy. The strap of the head torch felt tight around my head. I took it off and put it on the stone slate, next to the aurei. Then my body was engulfed by the shadow and became somehow lighter, and suddenly, I rushed somewhere at a galvanizing speed, the deafening, icy wind whistling in my ears.

At some point I felt I was drifting weightless. I opened my eyes. I was floating amid an impenetrable fog on the back of a huge black raven. Its feathers were shiny and firm like glass. I could feel their coolness against my skin. All of a sudden, the bird and I were out of the cloud and I was blinded by the sun. I squinted and lowered my head. When I got used to the light, I saw we were flying above an endless field of ripe wheat. The moment the sea glistened on the horizon, we started descending. We got close to the ground and then I noticed the men marching in the yellow field. They were arranged in a battle array, in ranks of four. Their leader was striding a few meters in front of them. The soldiers had shiny helmets on their heads. Armor was covering their sweaty, muscular bodies. They each held a shield in their left hand and a short Roman sword in their right.

The only exception was the right flanker, swinging a heavy mace in his hand. He was a huge man, more than two metres tall. I fixed my gaze on him – he had the side profile of Maximinus Thrax, the first soldier emperor. Two people to the left of the Thracian, at the other end of the first rank, strode a beardless young man. I didn't fail to recognize him, either. Gordian III, who was proclaimed a Roman emperor at the early age of thirteen – it was impossible to confuse him with anyone else. My eyes went on searching and found the usurper Silbannacus in the same place in the third rank. I remembered his face from the two antoniniani preserved. At the end of the array of emperors I saw Carinus the invincible marching. He was staring straight ahead and had some awns stuck in his beard.

The marching formation reached the end of the field, crossed a narrow cart track and went on through a sand dune scattered with thorny white flowers. The leader was the first to climb atop; he stopped there, put his hand above his eyes and stared at the sea. Only then did I realize this was Vasil Strandzhev. He was wearing a green military uniform, fastened with a belt at the waist, a knife

hanging on his hip. He had shiny black leather knee-high boots on his feet and a Soviet side cap on his head.

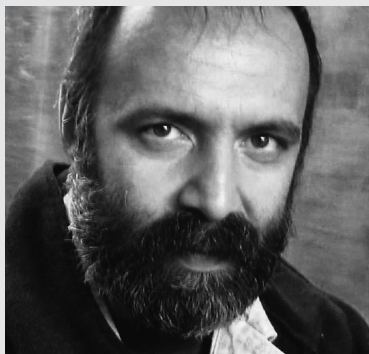
Suddenly, a long, drawn-out horn blast came from the sea. The raven carried me that way. There was an ancient single-masted ship lying at anchor on the shore, its hull buried in the sand. I could see a man standing motionless on the bow – a winged man with the head of a lion.

Without breaking rank, the squad of the emperors ran across the beach. Then the men waded into the water and went aboard one by one. The last one to climb the stairs was their leader. In the next instant, the sail opened with a whipping sound, the wind filled it and the vessel headed out to sea.

We followed its course for a long time, hovering high above.

At some point a small piece of green land emerged on the horizon and the ship sailed straight towards it. When the emperors saw where they were going, they brought a big barrel to the deck. They poured themselves some wine and started singing in their hoarse voices. Then the raven made a broad circle and flew back. I didn't manage to take a closer glimpse at the golden beaches of the Island of the Blessed. Soon, the sun set and we were engulfed in darkness.

I opened my eyes and found myself in the underground Mithraeum. I needed some time to realize where I was. Then I grabbed the torch in one hand, the soldier's bag full of gold in the other and headed towards the world of the living.



Vlado *LYUBENOV*

was born on August 21, 1961, in Sofia. He graduated in law from Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski in 1986. Since 1988 he has been working as a lawyer in Sofia and the Black Sea town of Balchik. Lyubenov became member of the Union of the Bulgarian Writers in 1995. His poems and short stories have been published in newspapers and magazines such as *Trud*, *Sega*, *Dnevnik*, *Plamak*, *Vezni* and others. He also has publications in online literary periodicals. Lyubenov has won awards from the Hristo Fotev National Poetry Competition and the National Poetry Competition for the Slaveikov Award among others. Short stories and poems by Lyubenov have been translated and published abroad. He is the author of poems, short stories, novels and translations as well. Works of poetry and prose and plays by Vlado Lyubenov, as well as critical reviews of his texts, can be found at www.vladolubenov.com.

B i b l i o g r a p h y

Poetry

I, the Incapable, Sur, 1991
Visions, Bulgarski Pisatel, 1993
Rural Nights, Fond DG, 1996
Marital Sonnets, Razhana-U, 2002
Accepting the Hopeless, Razhana-U, 2005
Lawyers and Butterflies, Bulgarski Pisatel, 2007
Irregular Meters, Razhana-U, 2012
A Hunger for Sin (Selected Poems), Artgraph, 2013

Fiction

A Dress for Two (short stories in collaboration with Gabi Gencheva), Razhana-U, 2010
The Emigrant (a novel), Janet 45, 2012
The Lawyer of the Lunatics (a novel), Janet 45, 2016

Translations

Inna Kabysh, Poems (translations from Russian in collaboration with Tatyana Doncheva), Razhana-U, 2009

Synopsis

While writing the novel, I was wondering again and again about the secret of creation. Real facts, taken from life, turned into figments of imagination before my eyes. Truths and lies began to lose their clear outlines, changed their places or transformed into things which never before existed in real life. But there was something even stranger: in only a few months' time, all facts — foreseen or created by me and written down on the white sheet of paper — happened in real life to my prototypes. There were times when I stopped writing and waited to see if what I had written would really come true and then continued to invent, but in the meantime I never stopped turning the real into fiction, too. (Therefore any resemblance to actual persons and actual events is purely coincidental). In the end everything got so confused — it trickled through my fingers and did actually happen — that I am no longer sure: do I exist and in which world exactly? In the real one or in the one I have created? Perhaps I, too, am a Pinocchio, created by someone who often looks at himself in the mirror to see how long his nose has become after every completed chapter from this story.

The Lawyer of the Lunatics

Excerpt / Translated by Irina Ivanova

As Ralitsa likes to say, life is ridiculous. Ridiculous in its attempts to make us despicable.

There are sick times, she tells me, and she always enjoys sick things — in painting, in music, in literature, in life as a whole. That's why you may not like my outlook on life, Ralitsa says. I am either saner than you or completely mad.

Ralitsa is always looking for some timeless things to lean on. A ray of sunshine, for example. The breath of a baby. The soft heart of the compassionate.

Ralitsa is an odd girl. During the day she works in a pastry shop in the subway station at Orlov Most Square even though she speaks three languages. From time to time she works the night shift as a hospital attendant in emergency rooms. She argues that it has an ennobling effect on her. That she undergoes a catharsis — that bittersweet sadness and awe at the infinity of life despite death and the ordinariness of being.

I watch her sweating face in the narrow room, her bare shoulders in the hot steam coming from the oven and, unwittingly, I start falling in love with her. Falling in love unwittingly is the most beautiful thing that can happen to you in the big city. Then you stop feeling how long and where you're going, where the world is headed and how your life is passing.

To keep herself in shape, Ralitsa also works for an agency translating documents and in her spare time she translates poetry and prose by contemporary authors she likes. Sometimes she writes articles. I read her translations and her essays on the Internet and I am amazed by her insight. The world is full of young clever people, innocent and optimistic. You simply need to find them.

Sometimes I have this strange fear. A fear that someone could hurt Ralitsa. Physically, that is. I have a fear of absurdities. They always happen to innocent souls. I fear that she may be hit by car, crushed by an avalanche, or that she may fall into a chasm, I fear that I might hurt her with these words of mine. I have the feeling that pure spirits hover unknowingly around Death or Death hovers around them.

Just like that, only a few days ago, a trolleybus ran over a friend of mine, a poet who was seventy-five. I saw him in his final days in the café; he was rather quiet and contemplative — he had never been like that before. As if he were

bidding farewell to life. Did he have a premonition of what would happen to him or was he unwittingly looking for the chasm? Because just like you fall unwittingly in love, with all your heart, you die unwittingly. Again with all your heart.

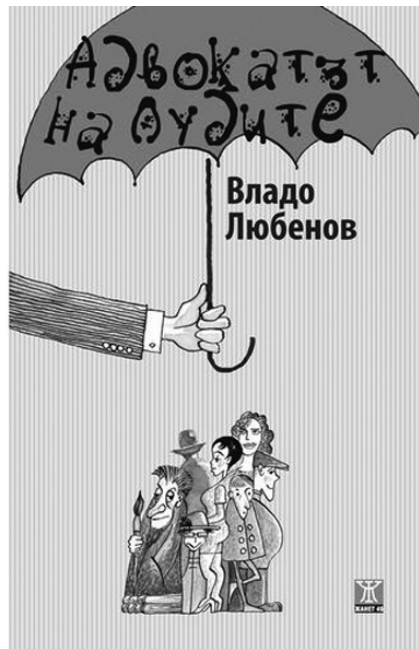
But Death is ridiculous, too. Ridiculous in its attempts to make us despicable. No matter how brutal it is.

Ralitsa says that we need the aggression which fills us today to fight a battle for the love we lack. But Ralitsa, isn't the whole history of mankind a battle for love!

Lately I've refrained from going into the subway station to see Ralitsa. I fear that she may not be there. That I will hear something terrible about her. The world without Ralitsa is so frail.

Sometimes it seems to me that when I draw someone's projection in my novel, someone dies in real life.

Parallel worlds are impossible.



M



Velina MINKOFF

was born in 1974 in Sofia, Bulgaria. She holds a Bachelor's degree in English from UCLA with a track in Creative Writing, and a Master's degree in European Studies from the University of Amsterdam. She started writing short stories within the UCLA Creative Writing Fiction program under David Wong Louie, Carolyn See and Aimee Bender. Her collection of short stories, *Red Shorts*, came out in English by Colibri Publishers in 2001. It includes the story "The Old Woman", winner of the Harry Kurnitz Creative Writing Award. Her work has appeared in *GRANTA Bulgaria*, *Vagabond*, *Literaturen Vestnik*, *Literaturen Forum*, *Drunken Boat*, *Split Peas – Fiction and Photography*, *Magyar Lettre Internationale* and *Public Republic*.

Velina Minkoff's debut novel *The Red and Blue Report of the Green Amoeba* came out in Bulgarian in 2015 by Colibri Publishers. It was presented at the Apollonia Art Festival in Sozopol, Bulgaria, at the Sofia International Literary Festival, at the European First Novel Festival in Budapest, as well as at the Bulgarian Language schools in Paris and New York. It was shortlisted for the annual Bulgarian novel in translation contest by Open Letter Books and mentioned as one of the important Bulgarian works of literature of 2015 in the annual survey of *Literaturen Vestnik*.

Velina Minkoff was an Elizabeth Kostova Foundation Sozopol Fiction Seminars fellow and resident translator at Open Letter Books, where she translated works of contemporary Bulgarian literature, among which was her own translation into English of her debut novel *The Red and Blue Report of the Green Amoeba*.

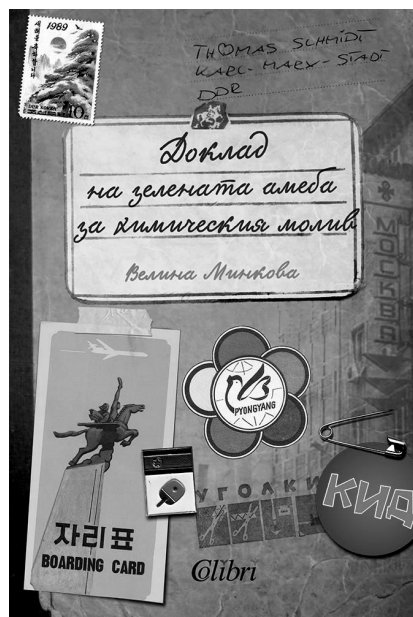
THE RED AND BLUE REPORT OF THE GREEN AMOEBA is a historical novel set in 1989, the year of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. The protagonist, a 13-year-old Bulgarian schoolgirl, Alexandra, is an amusingly unreliable narrator, who is instructed by her Russian teacher to keep a diary of her trip to an international Pioneer camp in the DPRK (North Korea.) The diary forms the core of the novel, as 1989 is also an important year for the DPRK, where the 13th International Festival for Youth and Students takes place. Alexandra describes with innocent honesty everything she likes and does not like, comparing what she sees with the reality of socialist Bulgaria. The silly situations she ends up in show her to be a typical indoctrinated adolescent from the Socialist Bloc in the late 1980s. Her gullible accounts of serious subjects such as the cult of personality and ideological differences between systems leave room for the reader to take a fresh look at the period. Alexandra comes home to the fall of communism in the winter of 1989 and her world will never be the same, but she takes the change unperturbed. As a character that becomes the static center of a world of change, Alexandra allows readers to grow as they read between the lines of her cliché-imbibed perception, which ends up destroying those same clichés in the process. *The Red and Blue Report of the Green Amoeba* takes readers back to life under socialism in the 1980s, providing a new and authentic perspective on a way of life that was, and seems to be, more than ever today, a parallel universe.

The Red and Blue Report of the Green Amoeba
by Velina Minkoff

Colibri Publishers, Sofia, Bulgaria, 2015, 184
pages

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2015)



The Red and Blue Report of the Green Amoeba

Excerpt / Translated by Velina Minkoff

1.

We finished 6th grade. I had just one B in my final transcript, all because of the horrible biology teacher. The rest were A's. I studied my head off, but it was worth it. And still, I didn't get elected for any kind of position in our pioneer organization. I had been the banner assistant for two years in a row already. That means one of the two girls marching on either side of the boy carrying the school flag at official school ceremonies, and it was only because I met the requirement of being as tall as him. I was obviously no good for serious pioneer work. They called me an "imitator of foreign models" because I studied English at the Alliance Language School after class and I took private lessons in French.

In school, however, Russian was my favorite subject. I was lucky to have Comrade Ivanova, the Russian teacher, on my side. She ordered our pioneer organization head to establish the International Comradeship Club, or the ICC, in order to appoint me as its chairperson. Ivanova told me the children of the world should speak foreign languages in order to communicate effectively with each other in the struggle for nuclear disarmament. And that Russian was the official language of half the globe and I should continue studying it diligently. I think she was really mad at the whole class – even after all these years of mandatory Russian in school, nobody could conjugate a verb correctly or recite a Russian poem, let alone sing a Russian song.

The ICC never really launched any activities during the school year, as nobody explained to me exactly what I was supposed to do as its chairperson. Foreign kids came to Bulgaria only in summer, in fact only when there was a Banner of Peace International Children's Assembly, every four years or so. Comrade Ivanova told me to draw inspiration from the extra-curricular activities at the Pioneer's Palace. It was true that I was signed up at the Pioneer's Palace, but only for one activity, and that was Popular Bandstand Dance, which I wasn't too sure how to apply to my new post.

Then Ivanova gave me letters from Soviet schoolchildren who were looking for Bulgarian pen pals. I distributed them among my fellow students in our class, but it never became clear who had replied to whom. I started a correspondence with Natasha from Leningrad, to practice my Russian. Soviet children have

beautiful handwriting, but the things they talk about in their letters are not very interesting.

At the end of the school year, Ivanova called my parents into her office to talk to them about me. I was nervous all evening, but they came home quite happy. Comrade Ivanova had told them how serious I was about her subject and about the club I had been appointed chairperson of. How, in order to gain experience in developing pioneer activities on an international scale, it would be good for me to go to an international pioneer camp. There were many such camps – in Hungary, the GDR, Czechoslovakia, France, Cuba, the USSR ... But it was imperative to have connections in the Central Committee of the Komsomol. My parents had none, so they gladly accepted Ivanova's offer to call an acquaintance of her brother who worked in the camp section. I wouldn't be able to choose, I should be grateful if they find me a spot for anywhere. But as I was an A-student and a pioneer activist, I stood a chance.

Well, maybe if I had been a straight-A student I would have stood an even better chance. The biology teacher was the most obnoxious teacher I had ever seen in my life. At first her hair was white, then it became baby blue and there were always disgusting things stuck to her rotting front teeth – she obviously never brushed them. I had asked her to quiz me so I could get an A for the class and I had learned all the required stuff about one-celled organisms really well. She agreed and I started speaking, but at one point I got confused and instead of saying that the green euglena photosynthesizes, I blurted out that the green amoeba photosynthesizes. And the amoeba is neither green, nor does it photosynthesize. The biology teacher told me to sit down with a B for the class for memorizing lessons without trying to understand them.

2.

My mom got a phone call from the Central Committee of the Komsomol and was told I would be leaving for Korea. She was thrilled, as she hadn't expected them to send me so far away – after all, it was a true stroke of luck for me to have the opportunity to see another continent. A night in Moscow on the way there and one on the way back, Pyongyang via Khabarovsk, three days in Pyongyang and two weeks at an international pioneer camp near the town of Wonsan on the Sea of Japan.

I couldn't believe it. They called me into the Komsomol with my parents and Comrade Arkadiev, who was going to be our group leader, asked me about school and then we had a chat in Russian. There would be children from the

entire Socialist Bloc at the Korean camp and the official language would be Russian. Comrade Arkadiev had a large, fair face and blue eyes – he actually looked Russian himself. He told us our group would consist of six children, three boys and three girls, all of us excellent students and pioneer activists. There would be two group leaders, Arkadiev and another comrade by the name of Gaidarski, whom we would meet at the preparation camp in the mountains.

It was a really busy period for them at the moment, because a delegation from the Central Committee of the Komsomol was about to leave for the 13th International Festival of Youth and Students in Pyongyang, which was why the prep camp wouldn't start until the following week. Arkadiev turned out to be my parents' age and together they reminisced about the 9th International Festival of Youth and Students, which had taken place in Sofia many years ago, when they were young. But Arkadiev pointed out that in Pyongyang the festival building projects were way grander than the ones in Sofia had been, and that the festival would be the biggest in the world to date. Our group wasn't going, though, because we were only pioneers, not yet part of the Komsomol, therefore not considered "youth."

3.

The preparation camp in the mountains took place in a huge holiday rest home with spacious, sunny premises. There were groups preparing to leave for different countries. Lots of children, all of them clearly straight-A students and Pioneer Detachment leaders. There was a class of high school kids from the Civil Engineering College, who were there for educational training. Our two leaders called the six of us from our group into the main lobby to introduce us to each other. After all, we were about to spend a month together. I insisted, as usual, that they call me Alexandra. Not Sasha, I hated that, I only let Grandma get away with it. I had managed to dissuade Comrade Ivanova from addressing me that way, although it did sound very Russian. At the Alliance Language School some morons had started calling me first Sandra, then Alex, it was hard to get them trained. Here it was important for me to put my foot down from the start.



Georgi MISHEV

Georgi Mishev Ivanov was born on November 3, 1935, in Yoglav, a village near the Bulgarian city of Lovech. He went to a vocational school in Lovech where he studied veterinary medicine and later went on to study journalism at Sofia University.

Between 1958 and 1967 he worked as a regional newspaper correspondent for *Septemvriiche* in Lovech. He is a member of the Lovech-based Hristo Karpachev Literary Club. In 1966 he compiled and coordinated the production of the first anthology dedicated to the writers in Lovech entitled *With a Scent of Lilac*.

He has worked as an editor for Narodna Mladezh Publishing House and as an editor and screenwriter for Boyana Film Studios, Sofia.

He is a member of the Bulgarian Writers' Association and chair of the Public Committee for Environmental Protection of Ruse since its establishment on March 8, 1988. He was an MP during the 7th Grand National Assembly (1990-1992).

He is father to writer/humorist Mihail Veshim.

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Adamites, a collection of short stories, 1966;

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Matriarchy, 1967 (2nd edition, 1978; 3rd edition, 2006);

Range-Pole Carriers, a novella for young adults, 1968 (2nd edition, 1980);

Fairy Tales over the Intercom, 1969;

Autumn Fair, a collection of short stories and novellas, 1970;

Rubber Head, a novella for children, 1971;

Drifting Away, a novella, 1973;

The Woodpeckers' Nest, a fairytale, 1974;

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Mammals, a short story collection, 1982;

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A Read for Thinking Reeds, a collection of short stories, 1992;

A Village by a Palace, 1998;

Danube Bridge, a novel, 1999;

Little Straw Orphan, a YA novel, 2004;

Patriarchy, 2008; (2nd edition: 2015);

Counting Wild Hares, selected short stories and novellas, 2008;

God Rest Our Fear, 2015.

THE VILLAS/SUMMER HOMES

This is a slow novel written over four decades.

I didn't write every single day, of course, there was no drudgery involved. The manuscript looked more like the register of an area's residents on a cadastral map compiled using satellite imagery and aerial photos taken from the tax authorities' helicopter.

I would return to the region and the familiar places every ten years like all regional writers do because I was curious to see how the lifestyle and the mentality of old acquaintances and newcomers had changed. Apart from the changing seasons, everything seemed to be very much the same. Winds blew, baric fields, anticyclones and air streams came and went, the inhabitants lay low and waited for everything to blow over just like the survival guides proscribed. The wind of change turned out to be a light breeze, it barely had the strength to make the flags in the squares and the laundry in the backyards flutter. Debates at the kitchen table about adding onion to meatballs, moonshine and Serbian music continued. The anxious question 'Are they going to knock our houses down?' from the time of self-sufficiency seemed to die down. They don't knock down any houses, they don't persecute anyone, they don't hang anyone. When everyone deserves the noose, they hang no one, Stoyan Mihaylovski had said a century earlier...

And, when you come to think about it, what was there left to be knocked down after the fifty-year-long night and the drawn-out dawn?...

And yet the region can offer a bit of know-how: organizing hunting trips with Mercedeses and Japanese tourists is now called team building.

Geogri Mishev

PATRIARCHY

Even as a teenager living in the small village where I was born, I could sense that the balance of nature was disturbed. A red army had swept over us like a tidal wave not long before and had carried away the men of the village toward the town. Our lonely mothers, grandmothers and aunts were once again the only ones left by the hearth – the wretched representatives of the contemporary matriarchy. Out of compassion for their unenviable lot in life I wrote around that time (1967) a book with the same name as the first part of the equation about the imbalance I had mentioned. In the second part I had to find out what had caused the evil that had led to our misfortune.

But how to go about it? Real socialism called even the most timid of efforts to speak the truth “primitive anticommunism.” It was only after its decline and the fall of the Berlin wall that the truth came to light, the truth that we had been living a lie, that we had been living in Marx’s utopia, which had actually taken us back to atavistic, caveman times...

Geogri Mishev

Patriarchy

Excerpt / Translated by Dessyslava Nikolova

One morning he looked out the window and saw several pairs of little black eyes staring back at him, momentarily frozen in their curiosity. Vanyo and Yordan, the two young apprentices, guffawed behind his back: the Kabak’s pigs were outside, let out in the early morning to walk freely in the autumn gardens.

Manol went out to shoo them away.

Their herder also appeared, a village giant with blonde hair and the pale skin of a *kabak* zucchini, which was why everyone called his family the Kabaks.

“Lift up your heads, you slaves to labor!” boomed Gaeno the Kabak by way of a greeting, as he always did when he passed the workshop in the morning. This was his idea of a class- and ideologically-appropriate greeting. He was a conscientious partisan with left-wing beliefs and the only person in Yugla who voted with the black ballot. During the agricultural regime there were two of them, Gaeno and Menko, a boy his age; they later went to work in Argentina,

Menko stayed there, Gaeno came back with a scarlet Bolshevik shirt, eager to establish a local labor party. His ideas about the reorganization of the world went as far as anarchism but he was amiable by nature; he spent a lot of time in the local pubs and this was why he was in his forties and still unmarried. Because he liked his drink, because his lot in life was to be a *male cuckoo bird* (that was what they called old bachelors in Yugla), and because he held almost no authority in the community, the party he was founder and secretary of for years consisted of a single member – himself.

“Do you ever think of me, Cooper?” he would ask the carpenter every time he saw him. He was forever canvassing for new party members. Manol would turn down the invitation with a joke: “You walk into a pub if someone’s gonna stand you a drink, Kabak... You walk into a workshop to make something.... Why would I walk into something I know nothing about?...”

This particular morning he merely waved a hand from the threshold and said: “Mind your own business, I’ve got enough on my plate already!...”

He was restless, he was listening for Beenah’s voice; she had writhed with the first pains at daybreak and they knew the day they had been waiting for would not be long now. He wouldn’t hear her if she called for him over the grunting and the noisy breathing of the snouts. He waited for the pigs to disappear behind the hedge and went to her.

Beenah looked at him, frightened, her lips swollen.

“My water broke! Go get Krastina!”

“When?” he heard himself ask stupidly and hastened to calm her down: “I’m going, I’m going!”

He had thought that he knew how babies were born but he had never heard of *water breaking* before... So they swam in the womb, that’s how they travelled for nine months!... There was a folk tale he had first heard as a child which said that the midwife fished the babies out of the Osam and maybe it would prove true... Even though growing fruit and vegetables was the main livelihood of the people in the village, babies were not found in the cabbage patch nor were they dropped down the chimney by a stork; Krastina, knee-deep in water, fished them out of the river. On and on the wax-bottomed basket would float, it would shoot the rapids until a woman’s hands stretched out and pulled it to the shore!... There’s a grain of truth in every folk tale.

Krastina lived in a neighborhood called Osam – so as to be close to the river... She had learned her unusual craft from her grandmother as a young woman; she had voluntarily agreed to be turned into a midwife, to be aged

prematurely (because the words for “midwife” and “old woman” in Bulgarian are the same) and it would seem that her figure and character came to reflect this transformation: even though she was about forty years old, she looked ten years older, she was aloof and almost never smiled.

When she opened the door, she was all set to go. She did not ask him anything on their walk to the American’s house, she was probably thinking about what lay ahead; yet he did not feel neglected. Neither did he take offence when she snapped at him by the stairs: “Not a step further, you have no business upstairs! Warm up some water in the cauldron, I will need it later..”

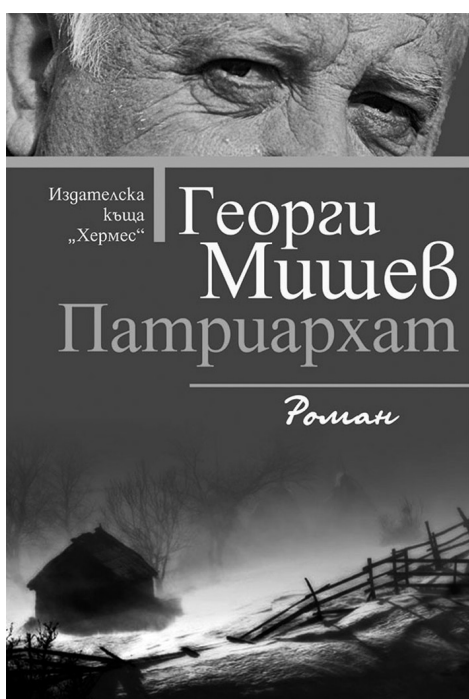
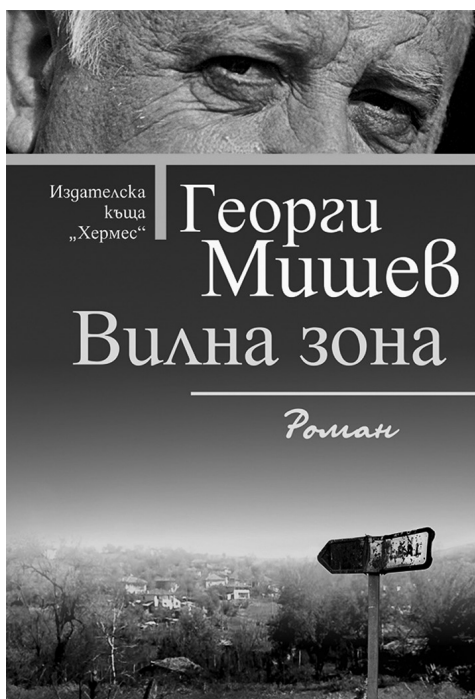
He was left standing between the house and the cooper’s workshop, by the fireplace where every Saturday morning they warmed up water for the laundry in the copper cauldron which could hold four pailfuls from the well. He lit some woodshavings and added kindling; a cloud of white smoke rose up from the flames and hung almost motionless for a long time in the cool morning air with no wind to disperse it...

Gazing into the fire, Manol could feel a pall of fears in his soul, still undispersed; the picture he imagined whenever he thought of Beenah weighed heavily on him. At twenty-five, his knowledge of women and their bodies was scarce, they were so similar to men and yet so different in their purpose – to conceive, keep, and carry to term the fruit of the fusion between man and woman, the natural *tongue and groove joint* where the miracle of conception takes place. And how unreasonable, how unjust God’s design was – a man can become a father in an instant and without the suffering, pain and worries of the body with the womb! How different was a father’s heart from a mother’s, which was pounding this very moment in panic and fear, full of premonitions and a glimmer of hope that everything would be all right in the end... He had never witnessed a birth; whenever such an event had occurred in his grandfather’s household, the men and the boys were driven out of the house and given various errands to run. He remembered one of the buffalo cows giving birth for the first time: it was torture, the poor animal lay, bloated like a balloon under the mulberry tree in the yard; something inside her had tangled up and no one could help her, hot sweat poured from her pores and streamed down, it was like her black skin had become translucent and you could see her heart pounding underneath, madly seeking salvation...

Manol listened: he could clearly hear from somewhere nearby that sound, similar to the beating of a drum, which tightly stretched skin made.

Heenoh, his father, had dropped by not long ago, on his way down from the

shepherds' huts on the opposite bank of the Osam; he had brought a slaughtered lamb, gave each of his sisters a quarter, stretched the skin over two crossed poles and hung it up to dry under the eaves of the workshop; now it swayed in the breeze and he thought he ought to move it because a stronger wind might knock it down. He started for the workshop but thought there was room in the cauldron for another pail of water and headed for the well instead. He turned the crank. In some places in Bulgaria the word for crank is *veetel* because of the *veet-veet* sound it makes when it's turned; the sound changes with the weather and the villagefolk, with their fine-tuned hearing, use it as a barometer. It sounded muffled now, the chain came up wet, the pail emerged soon after, full of water from the underground layer. At that moment the midwife called happily from the stairs: "I fished out the boy, Manol!"... Manol dropped the crank, the pail plunged into the moist darkness once again and a very long minute passed before he heard it hit the water with a loud splash, it was like it had fallen to the Underworld from the fairy tales...





Miglena NIKOLCHINA

is a professor of History of Literature at Sofia University and works in the field of poetry, literary theory and philosophy. She was a visiting research fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, from 2001 to 2002. Her research is currently focused on the history of the imaginary artificial being. In *Rhymes*, her latest poetic project, poetry and prose take turns in the spirit of the early Renaissance.

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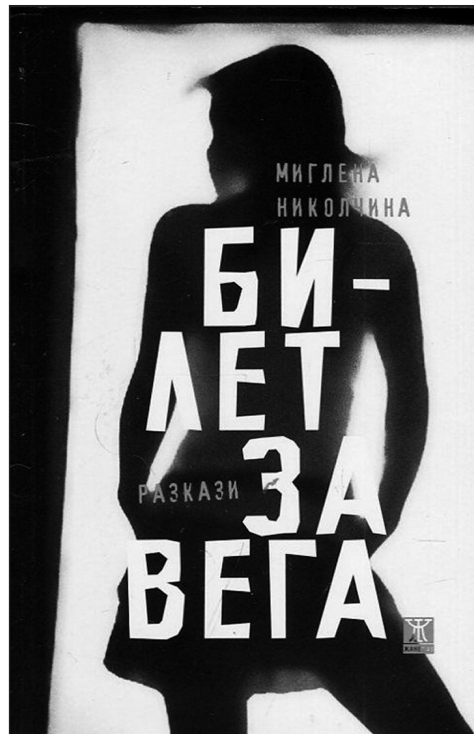
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The Kestrel

Excerpt / Translated by Dessyslava Nikolova

He can't fly," said Liuba, the postwoman's daughter who sometimes delivered the post instead of her mother. She was about ten years old, had dark skin and a mouth full of little teeth and stopped by regularly even though she never had anything to deliver. Her thin ankles peeked from her outgrown trousers as she stood in front of the cage and looked at the bird.

"No, he can't," confirmed Katerina.

"He hates us," the child said after a while.

"He hates the whole world."

"Because he can't fly?"

"Yes. And it makes no difference to the world."

"He wants to die."

"That's true."

"That's why he's silent. He's silent because he wants to die."

"Probably. That's probably why, yes."

"And writing poetry is a waste of time," said Liuba suddenly and turned to face her. She was dead serious, looking at her with dark, glistening eyes.

"And what do you think is not a waste of time then?" asked Katerina curiously. Liuba herself wrote poetry. This was one of the reasons why she dropped by so often.

"I don't know. Flying, maybe. He's dying because he can't fly."

"He's dying because he hates the world," said Katerina slowly. "And he doesn't understand why wings need to be waved anymore."

Liuba stretched out her arms and laughed.

"I think it's time to go now," she said. But she stayed on anyway, looking through the net.

"Eat," she said to the bird. "Please."

But the kestrel didn't want to eat. He didn't even so much as look at the bloody piece of raw meat bought especially for him. He let his uninjured wing drop to the ground from time to time and darker feathers could be seen underneath the lighter ones as if to demonstrate the anatomy of a flight. Katerina was no expert but she knew a thing or two about birds – of dying birds in particular – and this behaviour was not a good sign.

She didn't notice when the child had said goodbye. By the time she looked

up, the little girl was already halfway down the garden path, postbag slung on her back, a couple of newspapers poking out. She stopped by the gate and looked at Katerina thoughtfully.

"I almost forgot," she said and reached in the bag. "You have an invitation for a phone call."

Katerina met her halfway, took the invitation without looking at it straight away and went back to the kestrel. This time she saw happiness, almost triumph, a strange sparkle in his staring eyes that was almost tangible. It was like he was singing a strange song meant to sound in places devoid of air. And suddenly she felt like she was the one in the cage, behind the net, and he was in the vast free world outside, feeding her the powerful juices of his hatred, urging her to live, rejoice, fly. This ticked her off. She opened the door of the cage.

"Come on, out you go," she said spitefully, as if urging him to leave the unbearable vast expanses of freedom he was looking at her from. "Here's your freedom, the door's wide open!"

Her tone made her feel ashamed and she leaned toward the bird which stood perfectly still. Why did she want to save it so badly? Why did she want to return it to the empty effort and inexplicable vibration which flew up with a dash of sparkle and disappeared into her eyes like the membranes of antiworlds that was the world? Why did the spark have to be snuffed out, why did the triumph have to melt away and why did the bird, humbled, benevolently mellow, have to hobble about with a wise expression and a broken wing for the rest of its life? Oh, she had it all planned out already – the wise old crippled kestrel that contemplates the world with condescending understanding. But now she realized that he had been calling her, too, and possibly in a far more effective way: not with offerings of love but with hatred, not with mercy but with mockery, not with food but with a secret known only to him. And then she noticed that the bird was winking at her. A thin pink membrane closed over one eye while the other remained half-open and full of ridicule and shameless omniscience.

"How are you?" Stoyan asked. The connection was bad but she could still hear his characteristic dragged out vowels as well as his effort to sound casual even though he had to shout. She tried to say that she was very well but had second thoughts, feeling scared that her voice would sink into the pit of noise along with her words.

"Can you hear me?" he shouted through the crackling and the tangle of

voices.

"Yes," she said.

"Why are you silent then?"

She didn't reply.

"Why are you always silent?" he shouted. "I can't shout all the time."

"I'm not always silent," she said.

"You're always silent. You went to that village for this express purpose."

She didn't reply and the crackling and beeping filled the receiver.

"Listen," he shouted. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"A couple of empty words said in anger... it's not worth... Can you hear me?"

She didn't reply.

"Are you ever coming back?"

She didn't reply. The crackling went on for a couple more seconds and stopped. Katerina hung up the receiver and left the post office with slow, tentative steps. The rain had started again. The sky had grown so dark that lamps were lit here and there even though it was still early afternoon. A couple of seconds later her clothes were already clinging to her body. She stopped in the middle of the empty street in the rain. She didn't know what to do, where to go. She just stood in the downpour, confused, alert. The rain was cold and her body began to shiver. Katerina registered the shivering with surprise. It was happening somewhere far away from her and independently of her, it had its own desires and intentions. For some reason shivering in the rain made her feel ashamed. This was what he knew, she thought to herself, he knew the secret of her body, he could sense its shivers and protest. She felt sorrow, almost guilt, it was as if the kestrel was dying so that she could come back.



Lyuben PETKOV

has written and novels for both adults and children. His work has won him prestigious awards, the last of which came in 2014 from the Bulgarian Writers Association for his collection of travel notes *Within and Beyond the Promised Land*. Lyuben Petkov is a honorary citizen of Bourgas.

MURDER, Lyuben Petkov

Man has been killing for as long he can remember. From bows and spears to all the terrifying weapons invented by our contemporary civilization.

Why does one man kill another? What is our life worth in the eyes of those around us? How do people who have taken a human life for no reason feel?

Lyuben Petkov's book is a cry in defence of life much like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and other great works of literature.

Murder

Excerpt / Translated by Dessyslava Nikolova

I

They bury those sentenced to death without a trace – so as not to disturb the living. But can their roaming spirits ever be buried? Up until recently they used to dig up the paths in the graveyard and the Sea Garden and bury the bodies there. The gravediggers were the first to arrive on site, the military vehicle, the sergeant majors with their clanking weapons and the victim followed soon after. Suddenly the ground started shaking with the footfalls of a man running in the twilight of the bushes where a friend and his sweetheart were huddled. What panic, what a sight, years later our friend had still not gotten over it. What happened next I do not know but my head has been buzzing with stories like this one ever since I started tracking down these wretched souls.

People were crowding the stone stairwells. The wide upholstered door of Courtroom №7 creaked menacingly in the general confusion. For the past week it was as if they would all go blind after each morning and afternoon session of the Bourgas court. They insisted on hearing and seeing with their own eyes the first three of the seven people who would stand trial, the people who had kidnapped the clerk after robbing the Pomorie gas station and burned her in the car at the landfill by the village of Bratovo.

The crowd was raging within its narrow confines; there were also meek people in black, the circles under their eyes blacker still; there were all sorts, a mixture of pagans and Christians, or, rather, neither pagan nor Christian. And there was a spark in their eye – a tooth for a tooth, a tooth for a jaw, even.

The cries reverberated around the courtroom and drowned out the thoughts. A Bourgas actor, flushed scarlet, swallowed every sound with his half-open mouth; I could understand him – here, in court, he had found a more interesting spectacle than on the stage of the Bourgas theater in the building next door where he would sometimes play memorable characters. Everyone who knew him kept an eye on the childlike amazement on his flushed face. And when at long last, panting, he lugged in his television set so that the citizens could see the six-hour video footage compiled by the investigators, everyone gasped in amazement.

“He would bring a scaffold too, if he could,” Nikolay Pavlov told the main

defendant's lawyer, who was a member of the Sofia College of Barristers and was hired personally by Anton Vichev's mother. "Look at the eagerness with which he follows the trial."

"And rightly so, it is a spectacle," replied his Bourgas colleague.

"I'm rehearsing for the part of a revolutionary sentenced to hang," the actor later confessed to the courtroom. "I'm mentally preparing for the part."

"A real master of ceremonies you are!" the Bourgas lawyer sneered.

The actor couldn't care less.

"It's the will of the people," shrugged Nikolay Pavlov.

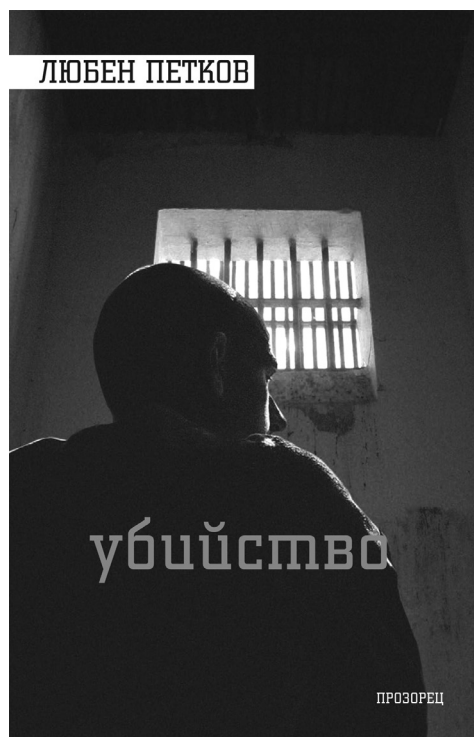
But the actor's damn Japanese television set blurred the picture, hissed like a juicy steak on a grill and spluttered annoying little sparks. The actor's face grew even redder, he lost his temper and started arguing with the technicians and the court staff. The argument came to an abrupt end when the honourable members of the court and the district attorney Peyo Arabadzhiev entered the courtroom. The citizens stood up. So did the accused. The fourteen sergeant majors next to them stood up to the full height of their athletic bodies.

Presiding judge Hristo Ivanov, wearing an elegant suit, white shirt and red tie, looked around the courtroom and sat down; the jurors, district attorney, accused and everyone else followed. The blonde head of Radi Yanev – or Drabhead, as his friends liked to call him – jutted up above the other six in the row and it seemed like his ears had grown longer. There was a commotion around the Japanese television set once again. But despite the actor's best efforts, it did not produce a clear picture. *Why?* – the presiding judge Hristo Ivanov demanded at last, more angry with the court staff than anyone else but he had to hide his rage because he was to give a speech right after the screening of the footage. Letting a stupid television set disturb his inner peace was completely out of the question; in some courts a trial would be postponed if the judge was in an affective state or psychologically overwhelmed. He wanted to wave away the people fussing over the set, they were trying too hard. *How?* The first rows were occupied by elegantly dressed women, they wore makeup and their hair was fashionably coiffed. They were all in a good mood, something normal before a premiere on the neighbouring stage of the Bourgas Theater. The presiding judge knew the psychology of the courtroom. He did not want to deprive anyone of such a spectacle, he had no right! Yet he made a decision: he stood up before the courtroom and announced that he was adjourning the court. Until the next session. And left the room abruptly. The crowd rushed after him. The sergeant majors had not foreseen this twist so during the afternoon session they stood

guard by the doors and on either side of the handcuffed men. No one dared make a sound but it made no difference – the court was adjourned once again. But this time around, the seven defendants were released after the members of court had left and it was only after that that the wide upholstered door was opened for the citizens, who were furious with the actor and the technicians who had failed to tune the Japanese television set.

But the following day the actor was triumphant: footage of the smoking vehicle in the Bratovo landfill appeared on the screen. The first three defendants – Anton, Medi-the-Turk, renamed Ivo Stefanov without ever having been asked his opinion, and Radi “Drabhead” Yanev craned their flushed necks toward the screen. The sergeant majors beside them also watched the movie, as did the honourable members of court, the district attorney, the defence, the prosecution and the citizens. The spectacle was amusingly terrifying, like movies about psychos late at night.

In the general distraction Anton Vichev scanned the courtroom for his mother’s face; they gave each other a sign. And at that same instant – new quarrels and rows with the actor: the screen was once again full of scraping sparks and blurred images. Bending in half and with his handcuffed hands pulled behind his back, Medi-the-Turk was rubbing his face against his knees; his eyes had glazed over, yet in the footage on the screen he was a well-built, dark-skinned feisty young man with black shoulder-length hair. Sallow, his hair shaven off, dejected, he had said he hadn’t slept a wink in his cell – and never uttered a word during the seven days in the courtroom. Unlike Ivo’s, Miladin Georgiev’s eyes shone like glass marbles; Anton and Radi “Drabhead” Yanev’s eyes also shone and Varban Kondov was forever cracking jokes, as if there was a fool living inside him and he was eager to come out.





Alek POPOV

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

Alek Popov has won many literary awards, including the Elias Canetti Prize (for *The Black Box*), the Helikon Award, the Chudomir Award, the Reading Man Prize and the Ivan Radoev National Prize for Drama. In 2012 he was elected corresponding member of the Bulgarian Academy of Science in the field of Arts, the youngest member of the Academy to date. He serves on the board of Bulgarian PEN and is part of the editorial body of the literary magazine *Granta Bulgaria*.

The Black Box, his award-winning second novel, has so far appeared in six languages, including English, and was a best-seller in German translation as well as the original Bulgarian edition. *Palaveevi Sisters*, his third novel, has won the Helikon Award for best prose book of 2013 and was translated in German under the title *Schneeweißchen und Partisanenrot*.

SNOW-WHITE AND PARTISAN-RED

Original title: THE PALAVEEV SISTERS: IN THE STORM OF HISTORY

First edition: Ciela Publishers, 2013, Sofia

308 pages

The story starts in Bulgaria in the 1940s. The Second World War is raging. Two girls from an affluent family, the twins Kara and Ira, are seeking adventures and freedom, determined to evade the destiny of traditional bourgeois wives. Raised by a British governess, they study in the most elite girl's school in Sofia and are avid readers of comics provided regularly by their uncle in the USA. Inspired by a combustible mix of superheroes and leftist ideas the teens decide to run away from their safe haven to join the partisan rebels. They concoct their own kidnapping to provide resources for the revolution, but the plan derails and the twin beauties find themselves lost in the mountains amid 20 or so rough anxious male fighters under the command of Medved. A rough leader, who went through the grueling school of Soviet military counterintelligence, Medved keeps a grim secret about his past and bears bitter knowledge of the system of GULAG. After a wild journey of battles, delusions, betrayal, death and survival, full of tragicomic absurdity, the sisters' paths split apart. Seeking refuge in the territory controlled by the Yugoslav partisans the twins are caught in a fierce blizzard and lose track of each other.

The novel cuts boldly through historical myths and ideological clichés. Popov takes an unusual and much needed approach to the past in the best traditions of Monty Python's satirical and playful disregard for oppressive orthodoxies of any kind. The novel headed the Top 10 list of Bestselling titles in Bulgaria for several weeks. It won Helikon Prize for Best Prose Book of the Year 2013 and Helikon Flower Award for Best Selling Title of 2013. It was translated into German under the title *Snow-white and Partisan-red* and into Serbian. The book was put on stage by Plovdiv Drama Theatre in 2015 with great success and was optioned for TV series and motion picture.

Currently Alek Popov is working on the second part of the novel due by the end of 2016 with the working title: *The Palaveev Sisters: In the Ice of the Cold War*. The author follows his restless heroines through Yugoslavia's rugged mountains, the bombed streets of Sofia and posh London boroughs. Ira is found by Tito's partisans

and departs with them in the wilderness of the Dinaric Alps. There she meets a downed British airman and later marries him. Kara returns to Sofia only to see their parents killed by a barrel bomb during an Allied air-raid. She is captured by the police, but manages to escape. After the new regime is installed in fall 1944, Kara becomes part of the establishment. Her bourgeois past erased, she works now for the communist State Security. Ten years since they parted, the twin sisters live in London not knowing about each other. Ira is happily married, or at least it seems so, leading the life she once despised, while Kara works for the Bulgarian Embassy in the disguise of a humble clerk. Both of them are sure the other is dead. Until March 5, 1953 - the day when Stalin dies and when they accidentally run across each other in a hatter's shop... Was it a happy reunion or the beginning of a new quest for freedom?

Voices from the press:

Popov enters a swamp full of poisonous snakes with a boldness and scope that impress. He finely manages to keep the track of his story straight and not allow it to be swallowed up by the shifting sands of one or another ideology - either jingoism, or leftism, or whatever mental trap lies in wait. Literature must tell stories and this is exactly what this book does. Popov's novel will most probably provoke some extreme reactions and through this it will perhaps fulfil its true goal. - Hristo Blajev, Knigolandia

It's grotesque and bitterly ironic: at once obscene, cynical and... terribly funny. Popov takes leave of the past with a smile, mocking it. Alek Popov's most complete and mature work to date... This is one of the most important novels of 2013! - Borislav Gardev, LiterNet

The book is so extremely absorbing that you wonder at some point - what really is the author's purpose? It is not a real "partisan novel" - that is for sure. But then what? An eccentric adventure story, with characters brought out from the recent past, and spiced up with irony... the novel deserves admiration and brings freshness and diversity to the landscape of contemporary Bulgarian prose. - Gueorgi Gruncharov, Bibliotekata.

This is an extremely amusing book! Although it would be unfair if we say just that, for Alek Popov's novel is something more: authentic, historically credible, informative and funny. It is a model for a genre which hasn't existed up till now and it sets a benchmark that hardly many other authors could reach. - Elitsa Pavlovich, Sunday Book Club, the City Girls

With a decent portion of black humor the author amuses himself with disillusioned revolutionaries and mocks a wide spectrum of political ideologies in an intelligent and witty way. - Teresa Reiter, *The Gap*

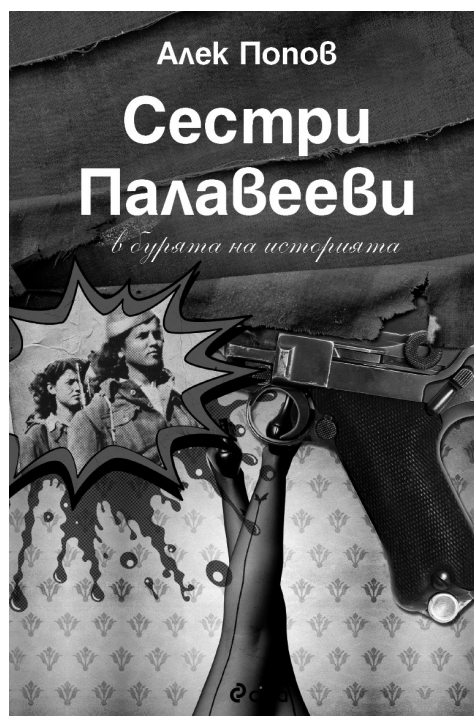
Snow-white and Partisan-red... be sure to read it! - *Klaus Kar, Book Market*

Friends of witty political satire will get their money's worth! - *Helga Glaas, ekz*

With *Schneeweissen und Partisanenrot* the 2007 winner of the Elias Canetti Prize Bulgarian bestselling author proves once again his talent for absurd stories. - Dietmar Jacobsen, *Poetenladen*

Extremely intelligent carved narrative about the clash of big ideologies with small and petty human weaknesses, needs and passions; about the collision of “scientific socialism” with ancient and resilient pagan superstition, but also about “class” differences and reflexes, governing our actions even when the level of will and consciousness are deeply opposed to this. - *Teophil Pancic, Vreme, Belgrade*

In *The Palaveevi Sisters* writer Alek Popov does what all writers must – tell the unvarnished truth as he has researched it. He has produced the first partisan novel since the fall of communism. (You can just imagine how many shelves were filled by novels and memoirs on this subject during the Communist years – enough to reflect the monuments that still stand in nearly every village). Popov has brought these stone statues to life and so has brought meaning to those generations who have only experienced communism through the hazy memories of their parents and grandparents. He has walked the tightrope between pathos and absurdity with aplomb – without a drop of cynicism. He made this reader laugh and cry. - *Christopher Buxton*



The Shadow of the Great Masturbator

(a chapter from *The Palaveev Sisters* by Alek Popov published by Cielia

2013) Translation Christopher Buxton 2013

Context: Twin teenage sisters from middle class backgrounds are on the run from the authorities. They have joined a Partizan group based in the Balkan mountains. The Partizans are a mixed bunch of young and old communists and Peasant party members, all dedicated fighters against the Bulgarian monarchist regime and their German allies. Many have adopted colourful nicknames. Nail – short for final nail in the coffin of Capitalism – or Digger – short for Gravedigger of Capitalism. Others have adopted the names of revolutionary heroes – Botev and Lenin. There is a renegade monk called Tikhon. There is only one other female – white haired Extra Nina whose grasp of Communist ideology has made her the Commander's trusted right hand Political Officer. The Commander Medved is a former refugee from the 1922 Bulgarian White Terror, returned by Russian submarine eighteen years later to command local resistance against the Bulgarian government. He speaks Bulgarian with a heavy Russian accent.

After a long period of inactivity punctuated by Police attacks, the group finds that one of their number Botev can no longer see.

Just five minutes later Botev regained his sight – just as unexpectedly as he'd lost it. He was terrified, as if he'd been hauled out of a deep well full of scorpions and snakes.

No-one in the squadron had any specialized medical training. Some time ago Extra Nina had attended a midwifery course. Deaf Tanko (Vitan Churov from Churov Spring village) had passed an orderly's course in veterinary medicine and so had been entrusted with the first aid bag. They called him "Deaf" because he couldn't hear anything in his right ear. He'd successfully cleaned up Lozan's wound and bound it, but in this situation he just shrugged. Examination of Botev's eyes proved fruitless – neither Deaf Tanko nor Extra Nina could find anything unusual or worrying.

"Have you eaten something off the ground? Have you drunk something? Did you fall on your head?" they pressed him with questions, like real doctors. "Has this happened before? Is there any blindness in your family?"

"Nnn, nnn, nnuh!" he moored.

Just in case, they searched for the key to this mystery in his rucksack. Apart from assorted male junk and a considerable number of cigarettes, what fell out of the bottom was a white and polka-dotted rag edged with lace. Actually it hadn't been white for a long time, it had achieved a yellowish tinge – Extra Nina lifted it up with two fingers and inspected it in incomprehension. Then she turned to the partisans grouped around her. “What is this...Comrades?”

The men shrugged with apparent disinterest.

“My knickers!” Gabriella shouted.

“Your knickers?! Why did you give them to him?”

“Nonsense! How could you think such a thing?” she cried. “One morning they'd just vanished into thin air. I thought that some magpie had stolen them...”

“Magpie!” Medved snorted.

Gabriella threw the knickers into the fire with a mixture of disgust and regret. It wasn't clear what the exact connection was between the knickers and Botev's sudden blindness, but everyone felt there was something – something not quite right.

“Vere did you get zo many zigarettes?” the commander asked in his severest tone.

Botev hung his head.

“Admit it! Admit it!” Tikhon called out spitefully. “You've be trading in stolen knickers, haven't you!”

“*What?!*”

“He wanted two cigarettes for that satanic rag, Tovarisht Kombrig! Ten minutes for two cigarettes. Capitalist! God punished him!”

“Tikhon!” shouted Nina.

“I meant to say Nature,” the ex monk immediately corrected himself. “The law of nature punished him.”

“I didn't ask for cigarettes. *They* offered them to me,” whined Botev, who had at last come out of his stupor. “I didn't want to appear uncomradely. I'd even have handed them over without any cigarettes. Isn't that right? Go on tell them, Maxim!”

“I, sort of...” the young man stuttered in confusion.

“And vy vere zeze tings zo nezizary for you?” the commander demanded sharply.

“They weren't necessary!”

“Why? So they could rub themselves off, that's why, ha-ha-ha!” Tikhon explained. “Come on let's stop playing dumb. Admit it!”

"You can talk, you mean to say you don't rub one off!" shouted Svilen.

"I rub off," Tikhon stroked his beard, "But not so much. Up to five times they go to rub off, *Tovarisht Kombrig!* Night and day. I knew something bad would happen...In our village we had someone blind. They called him the Goblin. Not only blind but dumb, too. Grandma would warn me that if I rubbed off I'd end up like him. *If I just see your hands under the blanket.* But who listens...how many stinging nettle strokes have these hands suffered, ey!"

He flexed his four stubby fingers and shook his head sadly.

"Me too, they beat my hands with stinging nettles," Kochan moaned.

"It doesn't just make you blind" added Digger. "In our village we had this Manol, a whole fifteen years lying paralysed. Mum said: rub yourself off if you want to be like Uncle Manol, rub one off, but I'm not going to clean your shitty bottom afterwards..."

"Well they told me that you get fits from it," said Lozan. "Illness epilepsy if you've heard of it..."

"If a child rubs himself off at home on St Ignat's day," whispered old Metodii, drawing on centuries' old folk wisdom, "the year will bear no fruit. Billy goat's seed will be watered down and not catch on. Hens will lay less and cows won't bear calves,

A painful silence fell. In everyone's memories there lurked some whiskery grannie dressed in black, with stinging nettles in one hand and a birch switch in the other. And now this hunchback belligerence lifted itself out of forgotten corners, stepped out bold and ready to fight, only as ancient grannies knew how, when they have to chase off the demons tied up in human nature. With waxy faces and glaring white eyes they poured out terrifying warnings and heavy prophesies of impending doom, family curses and painful death.

The knickers burnt with a low flickering flame.

"How long has this outrageous behavior been going on?" asked Extra Nina.

Botev pointed at the girls: "From the moment these came..."

"What?" Gabriela and Monika stared in shock.

"You're a lying bastard!" Bushy shouted. "I've seen you rubbing one off even before that! Back at Trichavo when you were on sentry duty...You infected the others!"

"Well, you don't mean to say you've caught scabies?" interrupted Gabriella. "What is all this rubbing off about? We haven't brought scabies into the unit, we've never been ill with scabies. We've had measles which is awfully itchy too, but that was a long time ago."

Now at last everyone giggled uncontrollably. Even something like a smile drifted across Medved's face. But who knows why Extra Nina blushed and the girls looked at each other in confusion.

"Can someone explain the meaning and the significance you place on this verb: *to rub off*?" Monika's eyes flashed with fury.

An embarrassed Extra Nina drew them to one side. She really wasn't an expert on the subject, in spite of the midwifery course, and that's why her explanation sounded quite strange. A few minutes passed before the twins understood exactly what the fuss was about.

"Oh that was all!" Monika exclaimed.

"We've read a lot about masturbation," Gabriella announced, "In one of my mother's magazines there was an article by somebody called Shtekel, an Austrian academic. He maintains that masturbation is a completely normal human activity."

"Yes, completely normal," her sister confirmed, turned towards the men and cried: "There's nothing to be ashamed of Comrades. You don't go blind because of this, you don't go deaf, you don't get fits. For centuries masturbation has been demonized by reactionary forces, so as to suppress the broad mass of the people. Today's science completely rejects these filthy lies and even thinks that they have brought irreparable harm to the human psyche. Long live free masturbation. Down with the tyranny of superstition!!"

No-one dared take up the new slogan, however attractive it sounded. The men lowered their eyes as if they feared some kind of trap. Or joke. The Grannies didn't give up so easily...Medved realized that their eyes had now turned towards him. It was only a matter of time and he already guessed what the question would be.

"How do they address the issue of masturbation in the Soviet Union, *Tovarisht Kombrig*?" Screw asked timidly.

Medved pulled at the ends of his tunic, coughed and spoke importantly: "Issue of mazdurbation does not appear on daily agenda in Soviet Union. Soviet people have more prezzing tasks to purzue. They cannot allow zelves to fritter energies on zuch frippery. I advise you too to zave your zdrength. Ve cannot rely on regular supplies. Every calorie is ezential for our zdruggle's goals."

Extra Nina waited for his words to sink into the minds of the fighters. Then she shouted: "If the people of the Soviet Union can, then so can we!"

"Why do you have to stick your oar in?" Lenin muttered.

"Comrades!" Screw leapt up with a voice trembling with emotion. "As

secretary of the Youth Organization, in the name of all our conscientious members I swear a solemn oath that we will stop this practice!”

“We swear, we swear...” chorused some uncertain voices.

Medved scratched his head in some disbelief. Botev was slinking by the fire with his head cast down. Walking past him the Commander stopped and fixed him with that heavy unblinking gaze that everyone avoided. “It is not nice to zdeal Comrade.”

“I haven’t stolen. I just borrowed them,” the unfortunate man wept. “I was going to return them the first chance I got.”

“Today you reach out for knickers, tomorrow a comrade’s bread. Just zo you know, nyext time ve’ll shoot you.”

In the evening the temperature fell fast. The partisans pulled on every pullover, sweater, jerkin and woolen over-breeches that came to hand, snuggled under covers and huddled up close to one another. The fire gradually died out. Only the paraffin lamp in the General staff’s tent continued to flicker. In front of the tent flap Stoicho stood sentry with a bayonet stuck into the ground. Medved had called the squadron’s officials together. From time to time the clicking sound of a typewriter flew through the air. It was clear to everyone that vitally important questions were being discussed, leading to strategic decisions which perhaps quite soon would change their fate.

The two girls brought the tips of their noses together to warm them up.

“Do you know,” whispered Gabriella, “whatever that Shtekel rabbits on about, this still doesn’t seem at all comradely to me...”

Monika stayed silent a few seconds and then whispered in her turn: “I wonder though whether we’ve provoked them in some way to behave like this?”

“How exactly?”

“How would I know...Perhaps we’ve secretly wanted them to like us? We’ve shown some feminine coquetry or other weakness, which has aroused particular desires, inappropriate for the struggle?”

She paused for a moment.

“We allowed them to see us naked!”

“It wasn’t on purpose!”

“No, it wasn’t.”

There followed another few minutes of silence. A soft warmth stole between their noses.

“When we die heroically in battle, they’ll understand we weren’t that sort...”

growled Gabriella. "But it'll be too late."

And with that thought both girls began to weep simultaneously.

Not a stone's throw away from them the peasants snored, rolled into one another like pumpkins. Botev was shivering on his own under a rug, shunned by everyone as if he carried the plague. Bushy had his own bag, lined with sheep skin, into which he wound himself tight as if it were a cocoon. Tikhon had latched himself on to Digger and Uncle Metodii because he was cold. For comradeship's sake they took him in and in gratitude he farted for them under the canvas. On Uncle Metodii, who had been swimming in another reality for some time, the stink made absolutely no impression. But Digger couldn't even think to cover his head. His ears were frozen under his thin cap. Apart from this, he was upset that Lenin had been invited to the meeting and not him. His ears took in the muffled voices of the youngsters, lying behind the bushes.

"And so what's the upshot of all this now?" Lozan called out. "It's that they've lied to us like village idiots."

"And it's not just you" Nail added grimly: "your father and your grandfather... to the ninth generation they've been lied to and maybe more."

"It's not as if it's the only lie that's been spread about!" sighed Dicho.

"You've always got to ask whose interests this serves." Screw pointed out.

"The exploitive classes!" a group whisper flew up.

"They've got the most beautiful wives, they've got mistresses, not just one apiece, they allow themselves all kinds of pleasures..." Screw continued pitilessly. "And what about the people? Two bare hands. And that disgusts them!"

"Yes, masturbation is a proletarian activity," agreed Nail.

"But this business with the knickers, there's something not quite comradely..." said Lozan. "We're just insulting our comrade women. What will they think of us? A band of mutants!"

"They said we could."

"Well, maybe we can but it's not comradely," Dicho broke in. "In the Soviet Union they don't behave like this. They're brave girls and they deserve respect. We have to find a way to make up for this awful impression."

"We'll make up for it," Svilen spoke quietly.

"How?"

"When we die."

"Come on, rub one off and go to sleep, mates!" Digger couldn't stand any more.

"Never!" the answer flew back. "We've given our word."

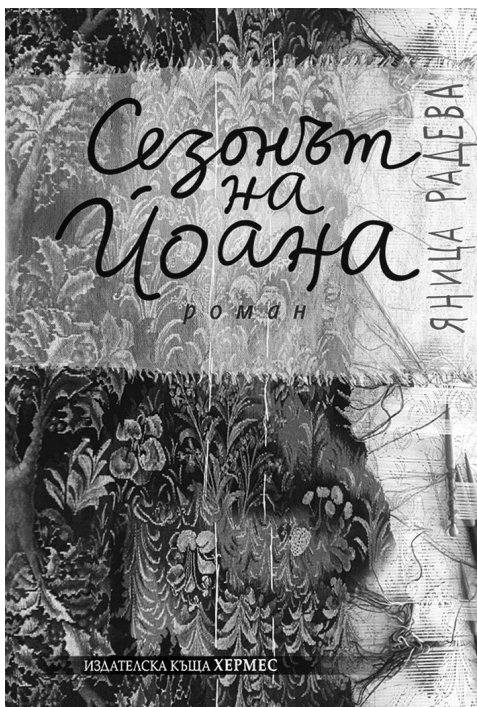


Yanitsa RADEVA

was born in January 1977 in the Bulgarian town of Yambol. She graduated from Sofia University with a bachelor's degree in Bulgarian Philology and a master's degree in Literature. She has published literary criticism in *Literaturen Vestnik*, *Kultura*, *Literaturata*, *Stranitsa* and other specialized magazines and newspapers.

Bibliography

Yanitsa Radeva is the author of a short story collection, *The Candy Dish* (2011), and two poetry books: *Other Rhythm* (2003) and *The Beehive of Words* (2012). She has won a number of awards from national literary competitions. In 2012 she was awarded the Ministry of Culture's prize for Best Aspiring Author for *The Candy Dish*. Her works have appeared in specialized magazines and newspapers in Bulgaria and abroad. She has published literary criticism in *Literaturen Vestnik*, *Literaturata* and *Kultura*. Her monograph *A Promised Circle: Time and Space in the Poetry of Ivan Teofilov*, came out in 2014 and won a prize from the Ministry of Culture. Yanitsa Radeva's first novel, *The Season of Yoana*, came out in 2015.



THE SEASON OF YOANA

With its gripping and straightforward narrative and through the life of a lonely woman, *The Season of Yoana* endeavors to show the ties that bind the people of a small provincial town and at the same time all the lives destined to never cross paths. The needle and thread of the narrative embroider a tapestry of contemporary society, of a world in which humanity's endless wandering opens up a path to an unknown season. A season which we can pass into only with humility. But what is the weather like there and what is our patient heroine waiting for while she crisscrosses the streets of her hometown and buys a dress for her birthday? What's going through her neighbor's head while she sits at the table in Yoana's garden? And what are the men smoking in the graveyard thinking about? We leave that for the reader to find out. Reading to the accompaniment of a French horn is recommended.

The Season of Yoana

Excerpt / Translated by Dessyslava Nikolova

By Way of Seduction

The woman turns and Chero sees her eyes for the first time, her eyes and that indent by her temples, as if engraved by a chisel, which makes her eyes elongated and somehow dreamy. From Mira's window he had imagined them differently, darker. He'd never imagined that such light brown eyes would ever look at him, so he says hey, how's it going, and is startled when the eyes seem not to notice him, they appear to be lost in a dream, but then the pupils fill up the irises, the eyes now look like cherries, almost like he imagined them, and the words get stuck in his throat, *hey, how's it going, what a surprise to see you! I'm Mira's cousin, we were talking about you just the other day, it must be hard to take care of that house of hers. I said to myself. Maybe you need a hand, I drop by Mira's place often and I've noticed that the fence over by the vine is broken, the hole's been there for a while, it's easy to miss but I have an eye for these things, so I...* But her lips utter sorry, I don't know you, you must have me confused with someone else, and she quickly turns her back to him, doesn't wait for him to say something, not even a single word, and there's frustration in the sharp staccato of her heels. He can tell he's scared her off, there's no use going after her, her hair, fluttering like the wing of a bird, recedes into the distance. He wants to catch that hair of hers, take it in his hands, squeeze her head like a vice and tell her, like he's told others before, that there's nowhere to run. But it's different now. In short: he lets her get away. All because of that rubber clown! And he kicks a dumpster in his fit of anger.

"Hey, hey, hey, what's that dumpster ever done to you?" a woman behind him says and while he lingers between the appropriate apology and a juicy obscenity he recognizes his cousin's voice and quickly makes up his mind.

"I was just on my way to your place when I bumped into that neighbor of yours, I thought we'd walk together for a bit but I must have frightened her, it was really awkward, she didn't recognize me." He's not looking at Mira and doesn't catch the ironic smile that creeps onto her face and goes on: "Let's drop by her house later, I should probably apologize and explain, right?"

Mira, who had already decided to spend her lunch break at home, suddenly gets another idea:

“Oh, but I’m not going home, I’m going to a business lunch at a place nearby, you know how busy my schedule is and besides, you don’t really think Yoana spends her days cooped up indoors receiving admirers, do you? Admirers like you.” Mira finally bursts out laughing, she wants to tell him about the garden again but something else comes up to her lips: “She goes out every afternoon except when it’s rainy or too cold, maybe she meets her girlfriends, they probably have a women’s club where they discuss different fabrics and designs, she’s not waiting for you if that’s what you’re thinking...”

And, purposefully laughing harder than she would normally do, Mira leaves him, *I’ll ditch you, too*, she thinks to herself, she’ll head down that street over there even though she hasn’t the faintest idea where it’ll take her and it doesn’t really matter. What matters is that she’ll feel the astonishment in his gaze on her back and before she walks away she says: “That’s a horrible shirt.” Just like Yoana had done a minute ago, she leaves him staring at her hair, peach-colored and fluffy like a dandelion.

But Chero is not looking at the dandelion, he doesn’t even take offense at her obvious mockery, he doesn’t even care, he’s even glad that she’s ridding him of her presence because this will allow him to enjoy the words she so generously gave him, like a fruit. The words that furnished the outlines for a new plan. Yoana leaves her house every afternoon. Yoana, who wouldn’t let him into her garden, goes away somewhere every afternoon. It doesn’t matter where. Yoana, who wouldn’t welcome him with open arms and trust, is away every afternoon. But he doesn’t care about her arms because he can already see his own hands holding the handles of the wardrobe. He won’t wait for many afternoons, he’ll even find out that very afternoon when exactly she goes out. He’ll hide in the shadow of that nameless little café near her house. He’ll buy the men perched around the plastic tables a drink, he’ll loosen their tongues, he knows just how to do it, he’s an expert. While they talk about women with bodies shaped like their beer bottles they’ll tell him everything. They’ll laugh their leering laugh because men that spend a lot of time drinking beer notice many things which they use to spice up their drink when the appetizers run out or are not there to begin with: Chero will sift through their words like sand. He’ll wait up for her and see what time she comes home, he’ll catch a glimpse of her dress out of the corner of his eye and he’ll feel her footsteps, he’ll feel her glide down the street like a shadow. Then he’ll leave the men and follow her, unnoticed, to see just how she unlocks the door, he’ll take a good look at the house, paying more attention than ever before. Because if she refuses to let him in the garden, he’ll let himself in.



Alexander SEKULOV

was born on January 6, 1964, in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. He has been nominated for the national literature awards Hr. G. Danov and Helikon. Alexander Sekulov has won the National Poetry Award Ivan Nikolov twice (1998, 2004). His novel *The Island* won the award for Best Foreign Novel for Young Adults in Serbia. Sekulov's play *No Electricity for the Electric Chair* was nominated for the National Askeer Award for the Best Dramatic Text of the Year. He is author of dramatizations of works by Bulgarian and foreign writers.

Alexander Sekulov's works have been translated into English, Serbian, Hungarian, German and Macedonian.

Sekulov is a playwright with the Plovdiv Dramatic Theatre, which is trying to revive the local audience's interest in Bulgarian storytellers.

B i b l i o g r a p h y

Alexander Sekulov is the author of the following poetry books: *Seventh Sky* (1988); *High above the Distance* (1997); *Enchanting and Light* (2003); *Maps and Geographies* (2010). He is also the author of several collections of essays: *The Master and the Stones* (1996); a book with fragments *The High Stone Hills* (2006) and *History of the Minimum Resistance. A Chronological Novel in One Column* (2008), which is a collection of some of his journalistic writings. Sekulov is author of the following novels: *The Collector of Love Sentences* (2007), *The Little Saint and the Oranges* (2009), *The Island* (2011), *God Descends on Athens* (2012), *The Engraver of Dreams* (2013), and *The Tramp and the Sons* (2015).

The Tramp and the Sons — the long-awaited sequel to *The Island* by Alexander Sekulov

The long-awaited sequel to The Island by Alexander Sekulov is now out. The novel The Tramp and the Sons is coming out on the eve of the 43rd edition of the Sofia International Book Fair and its premiere will take place at literary club Peroto on December 7 at 7pm.

A few years ago there were debates about whether *The Island* was a novel for children, a novel about children or a book for adults. The author himself gave a laconic reply: “Children’s books are read by adults who want to stop time. As long as life is one’s conversation with God about time flowing and passing and as long as all books describe this conversation, then every book is for everybody. I want to tell well interesting stories about things that I care about. Nothing more.” And this clearly shows in Sekulov’s new book — *The Tramp and the Sons* tells about the light we lose as we grow up and that we find if we grow up. In the new story a sailboat with four boys, a dog and a strange captain on board strays off course and drops anchor near a deserted Albanian strait. From the dark night emerges a fishing boat with no distinctive number or letters and with a crew of uncertain intentions. What will happen if among the boys, the men and the dog, who have ended up in the same place together, there is a girl with eyes as green as geysers, as well? Perhaps someone who is not expected at all will show up to follow them in the labyrinth of light...

The Tramp and the Sons

Prologue / Translated by Irina Ivanova

This is the ancient theater of light.

A river of clear June air rushes in with a smell of eucalyptus groves, mixes with the scent of lemons, oranges and carob surrounded by mysterious locked gardens, loses itself in the darkness of century-old olive trees, roars in the sea caves, snuggles into the light green bodies of fig trees, gets filled with salt, sand and moisture from the clouds and the waves, carries seeds of yarrow, marjoram and sage, raises the shouts of the children and releases them like swallows to announce the coming of Grace to us who have survived in the arc of the remaining seasons and are now standing on the shores of Greece: a Penelope, who weaves the light and makes the world visible even to the tired eyes of her god.

Where were you before you reached the summer?

And were you there when sailing boats did not cross the dark blue back of the Ionian Sea and, behind them, the silver air did not repeat their names with dancing and singing crystals — like a blessing?

Specks of dust in the rose of the wind, they run with open arms to embrace their favorite storms, to pull up the ropes and the sails, to remove the rust from the bones and the anchors, to remove the barnacles and the fouling from the hulls, to drift in the eternal water, to seduce islands, to leave themselves to be seduced in happy forgetfulness and to sail and to anchor again, to spill laughter, stories, prayers and curses in that absolutely uproarious, free, loud and indecent manner which becomes everybody whose havens are the sirocco and the meltem winds, the dramudan and the levant, the boreas and the notos, the mistral and the ponente, as well as their brothers who have remained nameless but invariably lead the way when out to sea.

And somewhere there, among the directions of the world, or rather — beyond them of his own accord, sailing away on the hull of courage, led by the pleasure of being free, there should be a captain with mocking eyes, who clutches the helm with one hand, and proposes a toast to the women waiting for him with the other, while humming:

*So many a boat I sent and not one reached your shore?
Not one brought my body next to yours,
Not one saw your oil lamp at the entry of the port?*

Somewhere in the world there is probably such a captain, it's impossible that there isn't one, we believe in that, but he certainly isn't on board the *Borboleta*, a wooden yacht with two masts, a dark green hull and a blue deck, squeezing through the narrow neck between Kerkira and the frightening shore of Albania next to the Strait of Otranto.





Yordan SLAVEYKOV

was born on September 2, 1976, in the Bulgarian town of Vratsa.

In 2006 he graduated from the National Academy for Theater and Film Arts with a degree in theater (directing).

In 2008 he attended the Second International Summer Theater School in Moscow (Creative director: Alexander Kalyagin).

He has led theater workshops in Turin, Italy (2002), La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland, and Massachusetts, USA.

He has produced plays in many theaters in Bulgaria as well as in the Yakub Kolas National Academic Drama Theater in Vitebsk, Belarus.

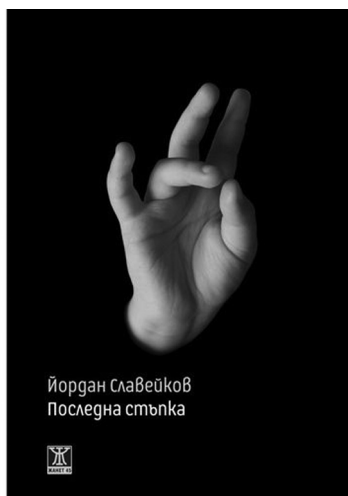
B i b l i o g r a p h y

Angel (2008) – a play that was shortlisted for the Ivan Radoev National Prize for Drama.

The Spider (2010) – a play co-authored with Dimitar Kasabov. It has been running at Sfumato Theater since 2011. The play has also been performed at and received awards from festivals in St Petersburg (2011) and Moscow (2013). In 2013 it was performed at the New York International Fringe Festival and received glowing reviews from *Village Voice* and *The New York Times*. It has been translated into Russian, English, Italian and French.

Last Step (2015) – a novel, Janet-45. In 2016 it won the Pegas Award for prose at the 44th National Festival for Literary Debuts.

Two (2016) – a play co-authored with Dimitar Kasabov – premieres soon.



The Younger Brother

Excerpt / Translated by Dessyslava Nikolova

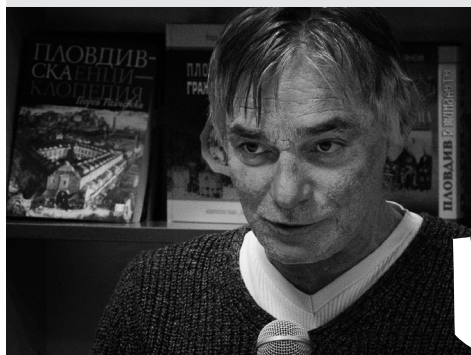
PART ONE: THEN

The idea of death has always attracted me. The graveyard in the village where I was born and where I lived until my twenty-third year was my favorite place to spend time alone. Our house was almost on the outskirts of the village and you reached the graveyard by going down a dirt road that was called, for some unknown reason, *The Old Road*. You couldn't miss The Old Road for all the world because it ran along the railroad tracks. I loved the blistering hot afternoons when my mother and father would have a rest after hours of hard work – there is always work to be done when you live in a village house. That was when I'd open the creaky gate as quietly as possible, trying not to make a sound, close it behind me even more quietly and head down the Old Road toward the graveyard. Later, when my mother passed away, it took me about fifteen minutes to walk from the house to the graveyard. As a kid I needed at least half an hour. To get to the graveyard you had to go through a level crossing that wasn't safeguarded. There were no barriers, only a sound signal. I would always imagine that I had to run across the double tracks just as the signal went off. I used to run even when the siren was silent. Because of the thrill of it. Because of the danger. Sometimes I would stop, take off my little sandals, step on the sun-baked metal track and wait for the signal. The sound of the approaching train would reverberate, running a couple of kilometers ahead of the train itself, reaching my bare feet and flowing into my body through them. That was how I felt the power, the hugeness, the danger of the train. I'd let the sound flow through me for a couple of seconds and jump aside. I'd put on my sandals, run across the four parallel lines and reach the graveyard by that same Old Road. It stood on top of a small hill, there were trees planted among the graves, high grass between the trees and lots and lots of flowers. Not on the graves – live flowers. And so many birds. It was never quiet. Contrary to popular belief, this final home was not a quiet place – birdsong could be heard even on the hottest summer day. I liked discovering graves I hadn't seen before. I would sit by the grave perfectly quiet. I would look at the headstone. Try to calculate how many years the person had lived before ending up here. The death of old people I accepted calmly. The death of children sent chills down my spine. I'd

imagine that I was the dead child, that someone else was sitting where I sat and was crying for me. I'd hold my breath, trying not to breathe. That was the only way I could explain death back then. Someone with closed eyes who's not breathing. That's not how I explain it today. Not that it matters. A dead person never breathes and their eyes are always closed. I liked looking at beautiful headstones. Marble ones. With names and dates carved into the surface. With a fence around the grave they belonged to. With vases on each side of the tombstone. It only seemed right to me to make the final home of the person you loved when they had been alive beautiful. In my child's mind the opposite was also true. If you didn't love the deceased person, you put a plain wooden cross on their grave and that was it. I used to spend a lot of time there. Or I stayed until I got hungry. Which is the same thing when you're a kid. I would start on my way home, feeling at peace. The sadness inside me communicated with the sadness collected on the headstones. They balanced each other out. I'd feel lighter when I got home. Until the next time I'd sneak away quietly, fall silent and let the sadness inside me speak with the sadness of others collected on the headstones. With the sadness that had appeared soon after I left the hospital after yet another life-saving operation. Out of everyone in our big family, I loved my mother the most. When she found out that she was pregnant with me, she got scared. She already had two children. A son and a daughter. They lived in poverty. During the so-called developed socialism and planned economy period there was work for everyone. It paid poorly, yes, but it was secure. We never went hungry but there was enough money only for the bare necessities. Food, clothes, shoes, firewood and coal. No excesses, no luxury. No vacations in the summer or winter. She told some of her relatives that she was pregnant. An unplanned child. Unwanted. They advised her *to get rid of me*. A very convenient turn of phrase. It doesn't refer to a human being. No, those you kill. You remove, get rid of something unwanted, something annoying. A mosquito. A louse. "Who's going to look after my child, me or you?" she said. "Where there's food and a bed for two children, there's food and a bed for three, too." She kept me. At the end of August, nine months pregnant and with a hoe over her shoulder, she left the village with my father, crossed the river by a rickety wooden bridge and went to water our *water garden*. Everyone in the village owned plots of land there. About two hundred square meters of farmland where people planted peppers, tomatoes, cabbage... My mother put flowerbeds between the vegetable patches. The other women wondered at this waste of space. She would smile and say that she liked to have more color in her life. I was glad because I could

always find her when I went to the water garden looking for her. The only garden with flowers. So she went there with Dad, started having contractions, her water broke. Her labor began. Long and nightmarish. She labored for more than forty-eight hours. Without ever making a sound. She said that screaming would not have made it any less painful. She had a peculiar, sharp sense of humor. She was overly ironic. When she had given birth to me, she told the midwife: "That was torture. Give him to me so I can strangle him." The reply she received was in the same spirit: "Too late, madam comrade. You should've known better nine months ago." C-sections had not yet come into use in the small provincial town where I was born, my mother didn't allow them to pull me out with forceps and it wasn't possible anyway. I was a breech baby, born with my bottom first, unlike the other children who were born head first. Bottom first, with my little arms stretched above my head. Not like the other children. I've always been like this. Different from the other children. I was constantly ill until I turned five. Bronchitis, pneumonia, swollen lymph nodes. I had an operation. All this sounds naïve compared to my last stay in hospital. I have memories from that one. A warm spring day. My mother had taken me to the house next door where a lonely elderly woman lived. Her husband had died a long time ago. She had never remarried. She would speak of him lovingly. And always in the present tense. I remember the color of her house. Yellow. A yellow two-storey house, it seemed enormous. A huge staircase led to the living area. The ground floor was actually a huge basement. We dropped by that particular day because the lonely elderly woman's daughter had come for a visit. She had brought her son along, too. He was my age. While the women talked in one room, the boy and I started playing tag. The doors and windows of both rooms were open. This I remember. I was chasing him, he was running. I remember the room. There was a window opposite the door. A big bed in the middle, a wardrobe to the left. Solid. Brown. The boy jumped on the bed, I decided to go to the other side and block his way, I took a step... and fell. I took flight. I was flying. There was a hole in the floor covered with a rug. A big hole. The little boy had known about it and went round it. I stepped right into it. And fell. To the basement. My flight was a short one. Maybe no more than a second. I didn't feel any pain. I just heard a crunching sound. Somewhere in my head. Then I lost consciousness. They took me to the hospital. A hopeless case. That's what they told my mother. A hopeless case. Something like *get rid of it*. She started crying. "Stop crying, madam comrade. You have two more children," the doctor said. No one dared operate on me. Two broken cervical vertebrae. The year was nineteen eighty-one. Antiquated

medical equipment. And yet. And yet the national Consultant in Paediatrics stated his opinion. And gave the name of a doctor. They flew him in via helicopter from another city. He didn't have the right to be religious. But he was. He took out a small gold crucifix from the pocket of his scrubs, kissed it and prayed for my life. If there is a god, he heard his plea. A long operation. It took hours and hours. I fell into a coma after it. They told my parents that there was a possibility I might not wake up. Or that if I did wake up, I might have brain damage. I stayed in a coma for eight days... eight days. Years later I asked my mother how she felt during that time. The time when it was not clear whether I would wake up or not. She looked at me. She looked at me for a long time. She was about to say something but dropped it. I remember the sigh that came along with her refusal to tell me. I woke up eight days after the operation, in the late afternoon. She told me I had looked at her. She had been sitting on the children's chair by my bed, waiting for me to wake up. She told me I'd said I wanted to eat and she'd started crying. They didn't let her see me, initially. Didn't let her stay in the room with me. That was the law. A parent or caregiver could only stay with the child if it was two years old or younger. I was five then. I don't know what she told them and how she managed to do it, but my mother lived in my room during my stay at the hospital. She spent more than half a year sitting on a children's chair by my bed. There was no bed for her. She was not entitled to one. She slept in that children's chair, her head on my bed. A mother. My mother. My own mother. She looked after four or five other kids in the room. Boys. Older than me. Bedridden like me. Feeding them, washing them with wet towels. Changing bed pans. I remember only one of them. Later she told me more details. The family had been on their way to the coast for a holiday. The father was driving. The driver of a big truck, a semi coming in the opposite direction, lost control and crashed into their car. It crushed them completely. The boy's father, mother and younger sister died instantly. His grandmothers and grandfathers came to see him every Thursday and Sunday. They brought him fruit and juice but they also carried bags of clothes for themselves. They would go to the lavatories on the floor, take off their mourning clothes and put on everyday ones. They would walk into the room. He would always ask where his parents and sister were. They would reply that they were doing well, getting better, that they loved him very much, they wanted to see him and would pay him a visit very soon... He was twelve or thirteen. I don't know if he could sense that they were lying to him. He probably could. One day he said to my Mom: "Mom, can I have some water?" And he started crying. Uncontrollably.



Lyudmil STANEV

(b. 1959) is a Bulgarian writer, publicist, scriptwriter, and doctor of medicine by education. His books include *There Is No Such Book*, *The Unpleasant Tatar*, *Inviolable*, *Little Night Tale* (illustrations by Krassimir Dobrev; the book won the Hristo G. Danov Award for Children's Literature), and *Less. My Friends* is his last published book.

Among the great merits of Lyuso Stanev's works is that by fictionalising rebellion as a game he doesn't seek, like some charlatan, to present the game as rebellion; he himself never joined in the game of rebellion. That is why his smile has remained a smile instead of twisting into a grimace.

Remaining true to your principles runs the risk of looking old-fashioned or of earning the reputation of someone who repeats himself or doesn't develop. Lyuso Stanev doesn't care too much for any likely reproaches of the kind. In a sense, this amiable author can be seen as the Peter Pan of Bulgarian literature.

Svetlozar Igov

Not Quite a Christmas Story

One dark December afternoon the sun has already started going down and if we get closer to Post Office N2 in the seaside town, we will see the beginning of this story. Let's look through the windows.

The room is small and dimly lit. Five women past middle age wearing shabby company vests talk to each other and sort the letters. They are slightly irritable because at that time of the year they are a lot busier. That's how it goes during the festive season in spite of the Internet. The oldest woman suddenly stops, holding a sealed envelope in her hand:

"Come see this!"

They all gather around her, she is holding the envelope which doesn't even have a stamp and on it, in a child's wavering handwriting, is written:

A Letter to Father Christmas
from Little Nicky Christov
5 Otets Paisii Street
The Town of So-and-so

The woman takes out the sheet of paper from the envelope and begins to read:

Dear Father Christmas. I have been very good this year. Mom and Dad are jobless and we don't have any money to spare. We scrimp on electricity so it's cold at home. Could you please bring me a winter coat, a stocking cap and a pair of mittens for Christmas.

There was a child's hand outlined with a pen below.

The five women in the tiny room felt somehow sad and thoughtful ..., or rather, they felt oppressed. The oldest one wiped her eyes with her palm and said:

"Look, we can each set aside 10 leva from our salaries and buy these things. We will gift wrap them and the night before Christmas Delcho the postman will deliver the parcel to the address. That won't make our salaries much smaller than they are."

And that's what they did. But ... 50 leva weren't enough to buy mittens too; their colleagues even had to chip in for the coat and the hat.

"Well, we can buy mittens next year", the women said.

The holidays went by. Some people were still finishing up the stuffed cabbage

leaves* and the new year was getting back to its normal rhythm. One such day, to the same post office, an unsealed letter with the same child's handwriting was delivered again. The women bunched together excitedly and the oldest one started reading out the letter:

Dear Father Christmas, Thank you with all my heart for the nice winter coat and the warm hat. I didn't get mittens but I am not cross with you. I know that you are very good and you have sent me mittens too, but those stinkers from the post must have filched them. I love you and thank you again!

*Yours,
Little Nicky*



*Stuffed cabbage leaves - a common Eastern European dish, part of the traditional Christmas menu in Bulgaria; during the festive season it is usually prepared with pork mince and sauerkraut.

S



Stefan STEFANOV

was born in 1986 in Sofia. He graduated from National High School of Mathematics and Social Sciences, and later completed a degree in Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of National and World Economy. Over the past few years he's been publishing articles, interviews and reports in a number of online newspapers and magazines. He made his literary debut in 2013 with the novel *Up&Down*, published by Sofia University Press.

End to End shows the new face of the young generation of Bulgarian prose – more daring and optimistic than alienated and pessimistic, and therefore, different from the postmodern O-authors we've already grown tired of. Stefan Stefanov's stories are intriguing not only with their infectious passion for telling the truth, but also with the balance between the factual and the fictional, which (with seemingly unpretentious literary means) entails troubling, even frightening metaphors of our present and future. Without sharing motifs and thematic links with the works of the satirists from the Bulgarian literary canon, the stories in *End to End* mark the appearance of a new talented author on the Bulgarian literary scene, who is able to carry on their tradition.

Up&Down

Excerpt / Translated by Kalina Todorova

A dios. One more push and I would make it. No speeches about my defeats, no applause for my downs and lows, no spotlights on my failures, the curtain would simply fall in front of my face and I would finally close my eyes and breathe again. I would breathe a heavy sigh of relief, as if I had suppressed it for years. I had the feeling that I had been waiting for this moment way too long.

I was about to leave my job, to leave my flat, to leave Sofia, to leave Bulgaria even. Gesh the Jamaican, Maggie and I were going to Montenegro for the summer and I doubt there was anything better that could happen to me. We had some bucks, had plans to make some more on the spot, had plans to unwind. The only thing we had no plans for was coming back. We'd simply squander everything we had and then we'd see. "Better to spend all our money there, like normal people do, than let it slip through our fingers here in this dump!" said the Jamaican, wagging a warning index finger in the air.

When he brought up the idea, I didn't even have to think about it. The trip was the better option, because the Jamaican was right: we would blow this money in Sofia anyway. And what's worse – we'd blow it in far more taxing surroundings. In this city, we rub shoulders with too many uptight egocentrics all the time and this creates static electricity, which barely charges the batteries of the holiday of discontent. Discontent, because most of the people I know are discontented for one reason or another. A holiday, because the only thing that matters is chillaxing and the holiday goes on year after year, until old age. Work can wait.

* * *

At first, I didn't even know if I wanted to go to Montenegro. Meeting Mile at Pinkie's bar played an important role in my decision.

We'd been drinking there for a couple of hours and I was getting fuddled. Mile had grown his blondish beard even longer than before and part of his huge sunglasses was covered by his bangs. He was talking self-importantly, while leaning on the ramshackle bar with one arm, his other palm resting on his knee.

"You're crazy, man!" he told me, licking beer-froth off his moustache. "What are you after in Montenegro? Or maybe there're not enough beaches and pubs around here? That's all there is in this place, after all!"

“Yeah, whatever,” I shrugged, while he was grinning at me, revealing his teeth. “I’m kind of fed up with this place. I’ve got to get out of here for a while.”

I stared at the scratched, dented surface of the bar. “I’ve got to get out of here for a while.” I had heard these very same words from people who never returned to Bulgaria. As if they had gone to the supermarket and I never saw them again. I didn’t know why so many people here, including me, felt this burning need to get away. At all costs, no matter what. This was not even an urge to emigrate, just an urge to get away. And not because you wanted to go somewhere, but because you didn’t want to be here. Perhaps guys like Mile were the reason for this. He was about to change the channel any minute now, change to a different frequency, where no one else mattered. Many people were tuned to this frequency, many people were in a room full of mirrors, where they could see no one but themselves. Mile let out a dramatic sigh and slammed his pint on the bar.

“The thing you’re looking for is not where you’re going!” He tapped me on the forehead with his index finger. “Because it’s here, Vlado!”

* * *

It had been some time since Mile had said something so appropriate. I was about to give him a handshake when Pinkie’s huge body turned up on the other side of the bar. He laid his massive tattooed arms on the bar, leaned forward towards us and said: “Mile, you owe me ten leva for those gins you had in March!”

“In March?!” Mile turned to him with a fake smile. “You must be joking... Are you sure?”

“That’s what my records say!” said Pinkie with a threatening nod. “My records never lie. You’re the one who usually lies.”

* * *

Mile started going through his pockets somehow negligently and I immediately realized what was going to happen. He had already changed the channel. He had the problems of the average twenty-first-century man – he had consumed more than he could pay for. And he did exactly what the average twenty-first-century man would do, the first thing that came to his mind. He gave me an oily smile. I shook my head, took out a tenner and put it on the bar. Suddenly, my head felt heavy and my chin was pulling me down to the bar. Pinkie put the money in his pocket, while Mile guiltily took a sip of his beer, gazing in a different direction. All the parties had accepted that this was the way the world worked and it would

keep doing so, as long as there was someone to pay.

I lit a cigarette. Smoking indoors was banned throughout the country, except in Pinkie's bar, since the place was illegal anyway. Perhaps that was the coolest thing about this bar, because otherwise there was nothing but stench, mess and alcoholism. In a way, the bar looked like the whole country – the chaos was the only reason for its existence.

I cast a glance at Mile, who was scratching his chin, lost in thought. He tapped me on the shoulder.

"You'll get your ten bucks back, I promise!"

It was all the same to me. In Bulgaria, we always live on loans or pay each other's bills, there's no other way. You just don't earn enough money to be self-supporting. It's just not enough, the prices are high, the expenses are many and so on and so forth, until you get the feeling that your life is a loan because you have to pay it off bit by bit all the time.

"Montenegro..." said Pinkie, while plucking at his thick lower lip. "How did this even cross your mind?"

"You can get your tenner back on Thursday even!" Mile went on rambling.

I shook my head in an effort to focus my eyes on the bar. I was fed up with conversations about money. Ever since I remembered, I'd been counting numbers in my head, numbers, numbers, numbers. Fewer, more, never enough. You add and subtract, add and subtract. In the end, it amounts to nothing. It's the same with people in your life; it's the same with you in their lives.

"Those guys suck, man, I was there five-six years ago!" said Pinkie. "They really suck! And they can't drive at all!"

"As if we can!" laughed Mile.

"Why, what's wrong with us?"

Well, nothing. Everything's fine with us. That's why I can't wait to get out of here. I feel so good that I'll dash off at top speed anytime, only to forget the lobotomy this country's been giving me for more than thirty years now. Thirty years, man. I was wondering what that gross sticky stuff was, I could see it in my parents' eyes when I was a child. I was sure I already had it in mine and now I knew what it was and where it had come from. My eyebrows dropped over my eyes, while my anger was climbing up my throat. The next thing I knew my fist slammed down on the bar. It felt as if I'd made the whole world shake. Our pints quaked, beer spilled over Mile's hands, so he jerked back in surprise.

"Do not pound on the bar!" he snarled threateningly, pursing his thick lips angrily.

Under my knitted eyebrows, I could see he was staring at me from beneath his knitted eyebrows. They formed a deep V across his forehead. The forehead of an experienced bartender.

“Here’s what’s wrong, Pinkie!” Mile cried out, banging on the bar top with his fist. “People are going crazy just like that! Stransky’s gone crazy, I’m going crazy, we’re all going crazy! Can we do anything about it? No! So what now?”

“Do not hit my bar!”

Suddenly, my muscles softened and my forehead hit the bar. I was turning to jelly in this heat, with the smoke and music around me and the voices inside my head. They were pushing, kicking and screaming in there, as if they were there to stay forever.

I took a deep breath, almost unable to hear my own voice. Lately, I’d felt that communication between people was simply an exchange of meaningless nonsense. One and the same words, one and the same thoughts, last-minute unfinished sentences, long-time broken friendships, faces you forget the moment you see them, but with whom you keep exchanging the same worn-out jokes anyway. My lips uttered voicelessly: “It’s no longer funny, man. It’s just not funny.”

Actors change their names, actresses change their make-up, and the series goes on and on before my eyes. In the latest seasons, the hyper-apes don’t fail to survive in the sea of information instead of knowledge, emotion instead of rationality, and sex instead of love, all the plots on the small screen. No surprise that more and more things these days are having a TV finale, instead of a real-life ending, not one from the real life I remembered, at least. That’s no way to live life. Sweat was seeping from my forehead, from my chin, from my eyebrows, from my nose, between my fingers. I was melting while shivering. I felt as if a fist of fire was climbing from my stomach to my throat. I hastily licked my lips. I had no strength to lift my head.

“I tell you what, that’s no way to live life!” blabbered Mile next to me. “Someone’ll go nuts any time now, I tell you, he’ll rush into some shopping mall or some office, gun in his hand and then teach us what’s what! That psycho might be even Stransky! Just look at him! He’s so going to puke, man! There it is, Pinkie! Stransky’s puking his guts out on your bar!”

* * *

At my age, I feel guilty for puking. Physically, I feel exhausted, like an old man. Mentally, dumb like a teenager. On days like this one, after a night of heavy

drinking, I used to think that this would stop at some point, but it didn't. It was too late anyway, because the whole thing wasn't about the need for fiery water. It was about the need to unplug. I just needed a proper unplug from the system, at any cost, or I was going to burn out. Everyone I know protects themselves from reality in their own way – be it alcohol, drugs, sex, sports, work, money, you name it. As Mile said, someone, and that might be even me, will go into some shopping mall or some office or maybe even to parliament with a gun in their hand. And maybe this won't be a mistake. Everyone's to blame that we've been living in this rotting country for years now. And I already know that if anyone claims the opposite, they are either fools, or feeding on the rot.



S



Valeri STEFANOV

is a professor of the history of Bulgarian literature at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. He holds a PhD in philology. He is the author of fifteen book of literary criticism, including: *The Labyrinths of Meaning*, *The Literary Institution*, *The Fate of Babylon*, *Bulgarian Literature in the 20th Century*, *Bulgarian Oral Culture*, *The Devil*, *The Four Authors of Don Quixote*, among others. In 2004 he published his first novel, *The Lost Donkeys*. He has won the Southern Spring Award for debut book of criticism, the Association of Bulgarian Writers' award for his book of literary criticism *The Work – A Place in the World*, the Sofia Award for his novel *Someone Down Below*, and the Knight of the Book Award from the Bulgarian Book Association, and other prizes.

Some libraries burn, the Library of Babel – never!

The Library of Babel is the infinite world of books and the dialogues between them. Somewhere in this library can be found the biblical story of David and Bathsheba as well. King David took a liking to Bathsheba, seduced her, killed her husband Uriah and took her for his wife. From this marriage, which was sinful in the eyes of God, the wise King Solomon was born – the brilliant apogee of ancient Jewish grandeur as well as its esoteric depths.

The book *Love Stories from the Library of Babel* recreates six variants of the well-known biblical story. An exercise in stylistics, but more likely an exercise in meaning. A study of passion and unfaithfulness, of loyalty, love and death...

The biblical love story is retold through the stylistics and the characteristic artistic worlds of six great writers from the 20th century – Jaroslav Hašek, Franz Kafka, Andrey Platonov, Jorge Luis Borges, J.D. Salinger and Robert M. Pirsig.

History is one and the same.

But the stories about it and the morals of these stories are always different.

Which is why people continue to write.



B i b l i o g r a p h y

Prose

The Lost Donkeys, novel (2005, Standart)

Someone Down Below, novel (2008, Diogen)

The Blind Gardener or the Soul Leaves at 10:45, novel (2011)

Women Are a Memory from Darkness, novel (2014, Academic Book Market)

Love Stories from the Library of Babel, short stories, variations on a theme (2016, Colibri)

Essays

The Poetics of Love, a philosophical essay (2016, Avliga)

Literary Criticism

The Names of Time (1988, Narodna Mladezh)

The Narrator of Modern Times (1990, Bulgarski pisatel)

The Work – An Unending Dialogue (1993, Sofia U Press)

The Labyrinths of Meaning (1993, Sofia U Press)

The Literary Institution (1995, Anubis)

The Fate of Babylon: Faces, Masks and Twins in Bulgarian Literature (2000, Anubis)

Bulgarian Literature in the 20th Century (2003, Anubis)

The Work – A Place in the world (2004)

The Art of Writing (with Alexander Panov)(2004, Diogen)

Bulgarian Literature – Worlds and Existences (with Milena Kirova) (2006, Dante)

The Devil: Attempts at the Outrageous History of Evil (2007, Sofia U Press)

Bulgarian Oral Culture (2009, Sofia U Press)

In Praise of Hunting (2010, Bulgarian Bestseller)

The Temple of Humanity. An Apology of the Masonic Brotherhood (2011, Faber)

Love Stories from the Library of Babel

Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel

*Reality is a ball
of distorted stories.*

THE STRANGE WORKS OF CERTAIN AUTHORS

In ancient times, falling in love with another man's beautiful wife was a fleeting joy with long-lasting consequences. In ancient times there was more time for love than in modern ones. Some love stories have been written, others not.

One evening the Biblical King David was strolling around the roof of his palace. From the height of his rooftop, he caught sight of another man's wife, Bathsheba, bathing. Despite watching from so far away, David liked the naked Biblical woman. He called her to him, and – forcibly or no? – made love to her.

David conquered the giant Goliath, how could he not conquer the naked Bathsheba!

Bathsheba found herself with child and David wondered how to cover up what he had done. Her husband Uriah was at war with the Ammonites, but he would nevertheless return someday and be faced with the telltale facts. The sly David called Uriah to take part in Bathsheba's pregnancy. Out of suspicion, out of loyalty to the hardships faced by his troops, or out of foolishness, Uriah refused to take part in this business with David and his disgraced wife. He walked around, slept on the streets of the city... In any case he did not see Bathsheba.

Left with no choice, David sent him back to face the fierce Ammonites. He secretly ordered that Uriah be betrayed and killed. The king's word is law – Uriah was handed over. The Ammonites, true to their fierce nature, did what was left to be done.

The great king did not wait long before taking the inconsolable widow for his wife. Bathsheba bore children alongside David's other wives. David himself begat a great lineage. The wise King Solomon was the lordly flash of brilliance crowning this grandeur. As well as its esoteric depths.

It is never enough to know *what* has happened.

For this reason, we insist on finding out why some things have happened, and others not.

For reasons unknown even today, various scribes and writers have created versions of David's fatal outrage. Someone can always be found to waken and rouse – and even misappropriate – the spirit in the old biblical stories.

There is another possibility as well – the texts published here are imitating certain handwritings. Handwriting is a seal. Where there is a seal, forgery arises. Thieves lurk there, carrying off whatever they like. To some people an outrage against another man's handwriting and precious texts is more tempting than everything in the world. Including an outrage against someone's wife. There is no way of telling if in David's time there had been such valuable texts, so tempting for appropriation, whether the king would have been peering off his rooftop so insistently. And getting involved with Bathsheba!

Conscious of the risk of fraudulence and error, we present here six of these strange works. Rumor has it that variations on this theme are far more numerous and have been written over the course of centuries. But such a thing has not been proven. This is why rumors have a bad reputation, because there is someone to spread them, but no one to confirm them.

The Library of Alexandria was set on fire and burned to the ground. Some libraries burn, but not the Library of Babel! The Library of Babel preserves everything – surviving works by unknown peoples, mysterious books of secret sects, scrolls by anonymous scribes, codices by great masters of the word... Some of the ancient works took part in the Grand Vizier Abdul Kassem's march across the desert. In those inscrutable days the vizier carried back and forth in an unknown direction thousands of books loaded in a caravan of four hundred camels.

All sorts of authorship is possible in the Library of Babel. There, the truth and fabrication have an unlimited number of doppelgangers. Every text can be sewn on to another text and thus, century after century, huge cloths are created. Traces are erased and clues are destroyed. Only very rarely does some new librarian take it upon himself to dispute someone's identity or to unmask unfounded (in his opinion!) pretensions.

We called these stories "love stories," but we could call them something else as well. For example, stories about violence. Stories about dishonor, suffering and weeping. Stories about embracing an incautiously naked woman. Stories about saving what has survived... The titles are given for the sake of orientation, but they typically function as a delusion. The author promises certain things, while the text offers quite others – we find that as well.

Beneath the titles of the works we note the names of the supposed authors. If the truth is otherwise, then excessively secretive people have been writing, and we have been deceived and cruelly misled.

In the Library, recognizing a work's provenance is a risk which the reader must take on himself and bear. There are thousands of situations in which knowledge is insufficient, yet curiosity is in evidence. Thus every reader is well within his rights to place questions marks where his suspicion is strong and his belief weak.

Whatever the truth may be about these dubious works, brief information about the six writers is not superfluous. For a long time it was believed that the life of a writer and especially a list of his ailments was a sure key to the deepest meaning of his works. It is still believed even now. There exist as many levels of reading as there were books carried and hidden away by Abdul Kassem, that strange vizier.

Wherever there is a list, there the Library is buried!

The Library is like death, it gives definitive meaning to everything. But in their infinite labyrinths, both the Library and death continue to conceal millennia-old mysteries. Somewhere the Library holds books whose authorship is attributed to Death itself.

Death is not only the final secret, it is the first author. Precisely it has introduced the use of names, pseudonyms, storytellers' masks...

The author is a lover of the visible and master of the public. But some authors, obviously including Death and J.D. Salinger, prefer the shadow. And they defend it as their dwelling place.

List of authors with short biographies

Jaroslav Hašek and *Franz Kafka* were born in the same city – Prague. They were born in the same year – 1883. Little Jaroslav came into the wide world in April, and little Franz in July. The world did not realize that it was a witness to great events, to notable nativities. For the greater part of their lives, both were subjects of the Habsburg dynasty, which ruled the glorious and nostalgic Austro-Hungarian Empire. Jaroslav Hašek was a veteran of the First World War. Hašek the soldier faked being sick with rheumatism, but was found out by the medical authorities. He really did fall ill with typhus in a prisoner-of-war camp. In September 1917 Kafka came down with tuberculosis. The restless Hašek died in January of 1923. Kafka caught up with him in death in June of 1924. No matter whether it was a question of birth or death, Kafka always patiently waited until the summer.

Andrey Platonov and *Jorge Luis Borges* were born in 1899. Borges delighted the world with his arrival at the end of August. Platonov surprised everyone at the beginning of September. Unlike the imperial subjects Hašek and Kafka, their places of birth did not coincide. Platonov was born in Voronezh, in the former Russian Empire. Borges was born in Buenos Aires, present-day Argentina. Besides being a subject of the tragic Emperor Nikolay II, Platonov was a citizen of the Soviet Union and a subject of Comrade Stalin. Platonov was a war correspondent, a veteran of the Second World War. He suffered from tuberculosis and deep melancholy. In those days melancholy wasn't considered an illness. He died in 1951. Borges came down with various illnesses in succession. He praised his progressive blindness. Likely due to security considerations, he claimed that blindness was a gift and not an illness. He moved into the Library of Babel for good in 1986. The position of head librarian at this library was saved especially for him. At this responsible post, Borges even now pays close attention to who reads what, who copies whom and what is being secretly carried out of the reading rooms.

J.D. Salinger and *Robert M. Pirsig* were born in different years. Salinger was born in January 1919 in New York. This hints to the geographically informed reader that he was a citizen of the United States of America. Like Platonov, Salinger was a veteran of World War Two. Unlike his Russian colleague, Salinger enjoyed his country's trust and worked at a more responsible post – counterintelligence. He suffered from permanent alienation and treated himself with isolation. He died in 2010. Robert Pirsig was born in September 1928 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. A citizen of the United States of America. In his younger years, the overly intelligent Pirsig was plagued by psychological problems. A veteran of the psych ward. The only living member of the strange guild involved in this Babylonian story.

The birth dates show that writers are born at different times and in different places. Writers take part in various wars, according to the ages they've reached and depending on their homelands' causes.

Writers, as can be seen from the examples above, suffer from various illnesses. And die from them.

Texts also get sick. Some of them are immortal. Other texts are like people – completely mortal.

May God watch over the immortal Library of Babel!



Lyudmil TODOROV

is the author of two collections of short stories and five novels, including *A Barge in the Desert* (2013) and *A Summer Dissembled* (2014). In 2013 he was presented with the national Hristo G. Danov Award for Literature. He is the scriptwriter and director of several films, including *The Love Summer of a Scamp*, *Emilia's Friends*, *Emigrants*, *Seamstresses*, etc.

B i b l i o g r a p h y

Losing Winnie-the-Pooh, a collection of short stories (1988)

Chronicles of a Love Story, a novel (1993)

Chronicles of a Failure, a novel (2002)

A Barge in the Desert, a novel (2013)

Skeptics, a short novel (2013)

The Blackbird Choked on a Cherry, a novel (2016)

THE BLACKBIRD CHOKED ON A CHERRY

The novel follows the development of an extremely close relationship between a brother and a sister with their fragile, mutually entwined inner worlds. This daring, psychologically complex story starts with a child's display of unconscious jealousy and a subsequent feeling of repentance. It captures flashes of the lives of the two, as well as seemingly insignificant dialogues and discreet eroticism, and gradually and imperceptibly turns into a deep and intense psychological tale about the impossible love between two kindred spirits.

The Blackbird Choked on a Cherry starts with the short novel *Skeptics* (2013) and continues with its sequel, this time expanded into a full-blown novel.



The Blackbird Choked on a Cherry

Excerpt / Translated by Kalina Todorova

3

"Can you see me well?" Sophie asked her brother. "I never know what position I should sit in."

"Just a normal one," said Nasko, taking out a cigarette from the pack on his desk.

They were both sitting in front of their computers – Nasko was in New York, she was in Sofia.

"You smoke?" he said. "Since when?"

Nasko didn't say anything.

"That's a cigarette, isn't it?"

"It is."

"How did you start smoking?"

"Just like that," he said with a smile.

Nasko's sister was the only person who could read his smile. In those moments, his face remained impenetrable. His voice didn't give him away either. A question crossed Sophie's mind: does Helen know when Nasko's smiling?

"How's Helen?" she asked.

"Not too well. Her degree is completely useless. She graduated in history, but now she's doing law. That's how all naïve Americans end up."

"Well, it's the same here."

"I know. The only difference is in the tolerance level. If Helen doesn't go much further than her history, American society will shun her. While Bulgarian society won't even notice."

"You're exaggerating."

"All the Americans who have been dumb enough to do humanities degrees usually, hm... what's the word for it in Bulgarian again?"

"Retrain. Retrain for a different job."

"Retrain for a different job and end up doing law. If they don't do it, they'll be shunned. Their families won't let them become teachers; that's a great failure here."

"It's as if you're talking about me, Nase! I used to be a teacher."

"I'll tell you about the father of a colleague of mine and what American pressure did to him. But that's for some other time."

"Tell me now."

"I've promised Mum to scold you about Nona."

"I know, she told me."

"Shall we say that I've already done so?"

"It's up to you."

"Well, that's the thing, if I were you, I'd bring up Nona the same way."

"I know. I've also promised Mum to talk to you, but I'm even afraid to start."

Have you and Helen been to that beach with the crabs?"

"Sophie, let's skip the crabs."

"Mum suspects that you and I have some secrets. She wanted to know how things were with you and Helen, if you were going to get married and so on. I told her that the most intimate thing you had told me about you two was the story about the crabs. And she persuaded me to talk to you."

"How did she manage to do that?"

"She promised not to buzz into my private life if I find out anything about what you and Helen are up to."

"To buzz into: nice word."

"Like bees in a beehive. Have you ever seen a beehive?"

"No, I haven't. And you?"

"Yes, in the countryside. Nase, are you homesick by any chance?"

"No, how did that even cross your mind?"

"Oh, please, Nase. Don't be."

Sophie's tone was so insistent, that Nase fell silent. He looked carefully at his sister and put out his cigarette where she couldn't see.

"Where did you put out that cigarette?" she asked.

"Sophie, you're one of a kind!" he uttered with an undertone of amazement in his voice which everyone but her would fail to sense.

"Where did you put it out?" she repeated.

"Guess."

"For all I know, it wasn't in an ashtray."

"In a flower pot."

"Is there a flower in it?"

"Yes, there is. Plants feed on organic compounds, don't you know that?"

"Show me the flower."

"Not even if you beg me on your knees."

"It's a gift from Helen, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"Show it to me."

"No."

"If the flower is yellow, Helen loves you, but not passionately. If it's red, she pretends to love you. If it's blue, I'll have to think about it. If it's pink..."

"What if it's black?"

Sophie fell quiet.

"Sis, I live in New York. In New York people give black flowers as gifts."

"That's really nice!"

"Nonsense! That's bullshit."

Sophie fell quiet.

"I'm not talking about Helen," Nasko added. "I'm talking about something else."

"Nase, you're homesick."

He reached for another cigarette.

Sophie pulled out a drawer and took out a slim cigar.

"What's that crap you're smoking?" Nasko asked.

"Panatellas."

Now the two were sitting opposite each other, smoking. Sophie was engulfed in smoke.

"You don't inhale, do you?" Nasko said.

"Why did you start smoking?"

"I started smoking because this is a mortal sin in America. I'm too lazy to kill or steal, so I decided to smoke. If you receive a letter from prison, don't be surprised. America is the cradle of democracy, I don't know if you've heard."

Both of them fell silent. Sophie was puffing out clouds of smoke, while thinking hard.

"How's Nona?" Nasko asked.

"She's fine. The only thing is that I'm not sure about my plans for her. I want to take her away from this country."

"What's stopping you?"

"You are."

"Is it my blabber about American democracy?"

"No, it's not that. You don't feel good there. I hope it's temporary. Tell me about your colleague's father."

Nasko blew the cigarette ash off his desk into his hand and began the story:

"The man was a university lecturer in American literature. Once he had a glass of wine at a gathering at university, then got into his car and headed home. He got involved in a multi-car collision on the highway. Police arrived

and started carrying out checks. You know how it works in America: they make you stand on one leg, touch your nose with your index finger, and so on, and so forth, only to humiliate you. One female officer got suspicious and drove the guy to the hospital. There, they took a blood sample and found alcohol in his blood. They gave him the choice between the following penalties: he either had to pay a huge fine or go to group therapy for alcoholics for a year and a half. He couldn't pay the fine, so he started the therapy. Despite being a sixty-year-old man, university lecturer and everything. The guy was drinking moderately, like all their friends, but his wife chose to believe the American authorities, not her own eyes. That put their relationship under strain and she left him. He started drinking for real, lost his job and he's in a rehab now."

"Nase, are you drinking?!" Sophie said, holding her breath.

Nasko, who hardly ever smiled, would sometimes burst into fits of uncontrollable laughter. His sister's question triggered such a fit. He stood up and started walking around the room. Sophie was looking at his empty chair, listening to his laughter: squeaky, long, drawn out laughter like the shrieks of a hyena. It had started in Oxford and later moved across the ocean.

After walking up and down the room, laughing, Nasko dragged himself back to the chair and picked up his cigarette. It was out. He relit it, just long enough to taste the butt's bitterness, and then took out a new one. After that he remembered something, reached out to his right and put the pot with the black flower in front of the camera.

"Here, look!" he told his sister.

"It's beautiful," she replied. "Don't put out your cigarette in its pot. It's a living creature."

"And it must feel pain, right?"

"We don't know what exactly flowers feel, but I guess it's not too nice for them when people put out their cigarettes in their pots."

"Sis, ash is good for flowers."

"That's a common misconception."

"OK then, what would you say about the black color? Does Helen love me or not?"

"She loves you."

"I'm happy to hear that."

Both of them fell silent. Sophie wouldn't take her eyes off Nasko.

"What was so funny about what I said a few minutes ago?" she asked.

"People are extremely illogical. When someone smokes, he also surely

drinks. Twenty percent of the judgements humans make draw on this incredible logic. I'm just tickled to death whenever I encounter it."

"Well, yeah, but before I asked my stupid question, you told the story about the father of your colleague."

"I gave you an example of the pressure and coercion American authorities subject their citizens to, not of the way someone becomes a hard drinker."

"I've gotten dumb," Sophie said. "And you know why?... Go on and tell me since you're so clever."

Nasko exhaled the smoke through his nose and said: "If Mum had heard this story, she would have asked the same question. You two are not just related by blood, you're also mothers. You wouldn't have asked me that question five years ago."

"All mothers become dumb, that's a law."

"A sacred one, I'd add. Tell me about Nona."

"Nona is torn between her father and Vlado. She treats both of them with the same indifference. She doesn't know who is more important to us at the moment."

Sophie fell quiet. Nasko gave her some time, then moved the pot with the black flower away from the camera and knocked the ash off his cigarette into his hand.

Sophie didn't see that. She had lowered her eyes.

"Nase, don't come back to Bulgaria. You can't imagine how bad it is. It's even worse than what you remember it being like before."

Nasko had his eyes fixed on her.

Silence fell between them.



Sonya TODOROVA

graduated from the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy in Sofia and holds a PhD in Geodesy from the Technical University in Vienna. In addition to scientific publications, she also writes short stories for fun.

A Concise and Practical Guide to Survival of Families with Little Children and Others in Sofia is her first book if one doesn't count her doctoral thesis with a title that is hardly less puzzling — *Determination of the Ionosphere by Means of Different Space Geodetic Techniques*. *Adi Landau's Pearls* is her first novel.

Sonya Todorova currently works as a freelance translator.

B i b l i o g r a p h y

A Concise and Practical Guide to Survival of Families with Little Children and Others in Sofia, Colibri Publishing House, 2015

Adi Landau's Pearls, Colibri Publishing House, 2016

This is the story of a pair of pearl earrings told by several generations: women and men, Jewish merchants and Austrian noblemen, Bulgarian partisans and soldiers of the German Reich, a boy from Vienna and a girl from Sofia. It takes us from the Jewish ghetto in Vienna through a small village in the Alps and the magnificent Ringstrasse palaces, through war-torn Europe to the Bulgarian concentration camp Kaylaka and the little town of Ferdinand. From the distant past to the near future, this is a story about the relentless vortex of time that imperceptibly turns people into heroes or victims, or, quite often, into both. A story about choice and freedom. The story of people who hope and fear, who run away and get together — and everything always happens by chance but if truth be told nothing ever happens by chance.



Adi Landau's Pearls

Excerpt / Translated by Irina Ivanova

THE HOUSE IN TABORGASSE

Vienna, November 24, 1667

I don't think it was right to take them, Adi," Hava Landau was looking at the earrings which her husband Adi had put into her palm without saying a word, with an expression in which agitation prevailed over admiration. "If it were money, it would have been alright. But earrings... You yourself know that come tomorrow they will start whining that you have stolen them. Or that you have taken advantage of a poor Christian's misery. Or that he gave them to you so that you wouldn't drink his son's blood."

"He has no children, he's here on his own," Adi Landau observed darkly, using his foot to push a stray hen that was trying to go out of the kitchen.

"Well, the blood of his nephew then or of his donkey or of his unborn child, who knows. Give them back to him, Adi, we don't need these things in the house, they will only bring trouble. Take them, I don't even want to hold them in my hand. You know, last night there were clashes again — some merchants from the town complained about our folks, chased them down the streets, one of them was carrying a bludgeon... Resele told me about it when I was at their place in the morning. We hardly see each other since Aaron forbade her to go out alone. But I decided to go to show her some of the new furs, those from Prague. If she likes them, we can make a good deal — the Lucerna family have been rolling in money lately, perhaps Aaron doesn't pay all of his taxes, how else? Adi, are you listening to me at all?"

Adi, lost in thought, was twiddling the earrings in his fingers.

"So you're telling me to give them back to him. And how is he to pay his debt?" The man's hollow voice was trembling with anger.

"He won't pay it back, Adi, and it won't be the first time someone doesn't pay his debt. Please, bring them back."

On the next morning Adi Landau, the merchant, showed up at the shacks, clustered here and there along the moat, which was almost finished, in front of the city wall. The thick angular fortress which enclosed the capital of the Holy Roman Empire, the German nation. On that side of the city wall the German

nation was represented mostly by poor shivering people, the majority of whom had come with their families from the provinces of the Empire to search for a living in Vienna. The wall itself was already built but there was still more work to be done. Many other construction sites mushroomed in the town, too. “One might wonder,” Adi thought while he was walking in the cold windy morning, “how one is expected to take part willingly and enthusiastically in the building of a splendid palace in the new baroque style when one dwells in a shack put together out of boards carried by the river?” Adi Landau himself lived with his family and his hens in a neat stone house across the Bridge of Slaughter in the so-called Jewish town. The ghetto was built some fourteen years ago and seemed to have grown a bit overcrowded already. There were more than three thousand people living in it perhaps, but it was relatively clean (“There are cases of plague, indeed, but there is plague on the other side of the wall as well, it’s not only here!”) and it looked nice with its cobbled streets, its three synagogues and its neat one-storey houses of stone and wood.

Adi was born in Bohemia. His parents had moved to the Jewish town in Vienna in 1627, at the very beginning of its construction. Adi was nine and he not only remembered but also took part in building the ghetto. Three years earlier, in 1624, Ferdinand II had allotted this place outside the city wall, called by the citizens of Vienna “The Floating Island”, to some 80 Jews – the only ones allowed to live in the capital at the time. Rabbi Heller said that two centuries earlier there had been many Jews in Vienna, and in other regions in the Duchy of Austria, too; they had their own communities and were enjoying good times. They didn’t have the right to work as craftsmen, as now, and had to wear a big round patch of yellow cloth on their outer garments, but they took up trade and money-lending and led a wonderful life indeed. Then the Christians began to envy them and make things up — the Jews drank blood, they desecrated the host and had made a deal with the devil... In 1420 the persecution, harassment, imprisonment and expulsion of the Jews began. The usual. After that, however, in the spring of the next year, Duke Albrecht V sentenced the Jews in the duchy to death. All of them. Those in Vienna, too. They brought those who hadn’t been killed or expelled from the city yet and burned them alive in a pasture. And so there were no more Jews in Vienna. After that for a long time, the eternal ban on their settling in the capital was in force. Until it occurred to the Habsburgs that to finance the wars they fought, it would be nice to have someone to collect additional taxes from and they started granting exceptions. And in the year

when Adi turned six and thus was almost halfway to his bar mitzvah, Emperor Ferdinand II allowed the Jews to live on the Floating Island — this wonderful piece of land, surrounded by the meanders of the vast muddy Danube.

Adi's long winter kaftan swept up the dust from the dirt-covered path which wound along the moat. The wind hissing in his ears carried the reek of something rotten and of burning rubbish, of potato peels and unwashed bodies, the familiar stench of poverty. Many years later the grand Ringstrasse would pass somewhere here, a magnificent pearl in the crown of the formidable capital of the Empire. After two centuries, very close to the place where stinking shacks were now lined up, would stand the University, the Opera House, the Parliament and the Rathaus. As well as the splendid city palaces of fabulously rich aristocratic and industrial families, among them the Jewish Rothschilds, Ephrussis, Koenigswarters, Epsteins... But this would come later, now it was outside the city wall upon which the poor village of the builders and their families leaned.

Crude scrawny faces were looking gloomily through the windows of the shacks. Faces which filled with fear and hatred at the sight of Adi Landau's big hat and long curly beard. No matter that the requirement to sew a yellow round patch to their garments had been completely abolished more than forty years ago. "And rightly so," Adi thought. "Why waste cloth and spoil garments when people can recognize a Jew from afar and hate him so from afar, no matter why he has come."

Adi Landau, burly and composed, was almost used to this kind of attitude and could control himself. He walked quickly and with determination without looking around too much in the icy November morning. And still — these simple peasant faces, these people to whom he had done nothing bad, people, whom, from an objective point of view, he was actually helping. How many of them paid off their debts? One out of three? And how many of them remembered to use words such as "please" and "thank you"? Maybe one person only so far and it was a woman, meaning it didn't count. But Adi Landau was used to that and to a large extent he controlled himself. Until a group of scruffy shivering children started calling him names and pulling at his kaftan got under his feet. Adi stopped, looked the most insolent of them in the eye and baring his teeth at him, growled quietly: "Boo!" The children started screaming, burst into tears and ran away. And Adi continued walking ahead, feeling guiltily content. An hour later, however, it turned out that his little excursion had been in vain:

the debtor with the earrings had disappeared. From the few people who dared to answer his questions Adi Landau learned that Mr Alfred Oberle, a former farmhand, had packed his bags a few days ago and had headed by ox cart back to his homeland far west, beyond the Arlberg mountain. He hadn't said why.

On his way home Adi Landau stopped on the Bridge of Slaughter and stared for a long time into the turbid river waters with his hands propped on the wooden railings. In each palm he was tightly holding a big sparkling pearl with an irregular shape in an elegant silver halo and embellished with small, amazingly beautiful transparent gemstones, which — Adi was almost certain — would turn out to be diamonds, cut according to the new fashion.

After the end of the Thirty Years' War the Spanish style with its threatening spiked shapes, heavy fabrics and somber colors was replaced by French fashion. In the craft of jewelry making this change found expression mainly in the preference for luxury trinkets with flower motifs and most of all diamonds. Adi knew something about jewelry and had liked diamonds very much since he was a child. When he was little his uncle — the jewelry dealer Shlomo — would show him from time to time the sparkling little gemstones which seemed to gather the rays of sunshine in their center. Adi would gaze at them in awe, but Fetter Shlomo never let him hold any of them. At that time diamonds were used very seldom because they were difficult to cut. Some time around and after 1640, however, the master jewelers found some clever new technologies to cut and polish diamonds and soon faceting machines allowing eight, sixteen and even thirty-two facets began to appear. Around that time silver replaced gold as the preferred jewelry metal, especially when combined with diamonds and various other gemstones, while brooches and earrings began to dominate the jewelry fashion. That was why Adi suspected that in his palms he was holding a pair of magnificent modern earrings created by a skillful master of the baroque style for some more or less charming but certainly very rich lady. But that wasn't what made him remove his hands from the railings and hide the earrings deep in the folds of his black kaftan. There was something in the mysterious creamy glow of the pearls, in the joyous sparkle of the little diamonds and the calm elegance of the silver, something vaguely familiar, something which made him think that the poor fool Mr Alfred Oberle, a former farmhand, was only an accidental bearer of these two little pieces of perfect beauty. Beauty which fate meant to be for him only, because these were not simply pearls but his pearls. Adi Landau's pearls.

He told Hava that Mr Oberle had left for his homeland that morning by ox cart after he got back his pearl earrings. Hava was relieved and glad. She gathered up the unruly locks of black hair which were always slipping out from under the linen kerchief and put on her apron. She prepared Krautfleckerln for lunch.

As soon as the next year they started chasing them away again. They harassed them for a while and in 1670 Kaiser Leopold I ordered the expulsion of all Jews from Vienna and the demolition of the Jewish town. In her haste Hava managed to take only some clothes and an armful of furs, and Adi — his Book and two hens. The earrings he hid in his sock. They were to remain there till the end of his life and then to pass to the next Landau. And just like this, from sock to sock and from pocket to pocket, the pearls would spend the next 348 years.



Silvia TOMOVA

was born on June 9, 1973, in Sofia, Bulgaria. She earned degrees in Defectology and Journalism from Sofia University. She has years of experience working as a reporter and editor in various print and electronic media. Tomova has published two collections of short stories – *Good Day, R.* and *Black Olives and Two Men* – as well as three novels: *Skin*, *Titus of Nicomedia* and *The Printer*. In 2007 she won the Rashko Sugarev National Short Story Competition and in 2010 she won the LIBER Academia Book of the Year award. Her short stories have been translated into Croatian, Polish, Belarusian and English. Her novel *Titus of Nicomedia* has been translated into Serbian and was included in the cultural program organized to mark 1700 years of the signing of the Edict of Milan in the city of Nis. In 2015 *The Printer* was shortlisted for the Helikon award and was among the six novels shortlisted for the Bulgarian Novel of the Year award.

The Printer

Excerpt / Translated by Dessyslava Nikolova

One such night Jacob called Ham again, scratched him behind the ears, tied a rope around his neck and led him toward the church. As they were walking past the monastery kitchens, however, the dog grew anxious. It reared on its back legs and almost dragged the young man to the door. It was closed but one could clearly hear indefinite noises coming from within. It sounded like something between loud munching and the cracking of a whip and it was making someone whimper quietly. Jacob thought that maybe some animal had slipped inside, a cat or a sheep perhaps, so he decided to lead Ham away first and come back to check. He pulled the resisting dog toward the tree, tied it there, lit a lantern and made his way back to the kitchens. He could clearly hear the noises coming from inside. Maybe someone had locked the door without knowing that there was somebody there, but this did not explain the strange whisper that splintered the darkness on the other side of the door. Jacob took a deep breath and pushed the door open. The light glided over the tables and chairs, reached the very back of the room and shone on two entangled men right under the icon of St Athanasius. They were both half-naked and the light of the lantern immediately made their bare thighs glow pink. Jacob made a move to cover his eyes but what he had seen was so shocking that he couldn't even muster the strength to take a step back. The lantern slipped out of his hand and the flame went out in an instant but the young man had enough time to recognize the faces on the opposite end of the room. Pantaleon almost screamed when he saw Jacob in the doorway and the other man, the one the monks had charged with the most ungrateful of tasks, fell to his knees and buried his face in the ground.

There was a sudden commotion, Jacob could barely make out what was happening. The noise had woken Ioasaf up, most of the monks were on their feet as well. Someone hit him on the back of the head and almost knocked him to the ground. Another monk gave him a kick and a third took him by the ear and almost dragged him out. While he was struggling to get up, Jacob could hear Ham's sad whimpering. The dog was running furiously around the tree, the rope around his neck had almost cut through the skin, his bark was melting into the shouts of the monks. The door of the kitchens shut and the sounds that the young man heard from within caused him almost physical pain. It was as

if someone had forced him back to his childhood, to the time when those boys had ambushed him in the woods to undress him and make him feel worthless, powerless and humiliated. Pantaleon's wails got stuck in his throat and even though Jacob, who was still trying to get back to his feet, was utterly repulsed, he felt extremely sorry for the two men behind the closed door. The beating in Kamena Reka – which had almost killed him and which he had survived by some miracle – had cleaved his life in half. It sent him to the monastery, it took him away from his books and his parents. And now he was faced with another, no less painful, separation. With Pantaleon. A man sunk in sin but a companion in this vast rough world, nevertheless. Jacob finally got up and untied Ham. The dog threw itself into Jacob's arms cheerfully, licked his flushed face and the two of them made their way toward the cell. That night Joachim's remains did not need a vigil. The monastery was awake. And it had turned into a fist.

The morning service didn't start at the usual time. Jacob had spent almost the entire night awake but the morning found him feeling refreshed. He was up before dawn and cleaned the barn, all the while trying to hear whether the monastery had finally calmed down. It was dark and quiet in the kitchens, the altar lamp in the chapel gave off a feeble glow, everything was peaceful, it was as if the events of the night had been nothing more than a bad dream. Jacob had just decided to go into the chapel and pray in front of the crucifix when he saw Theophil coming towards him across the courtyard. His expression was very serious, even resolute. Theophil noticed him, too. His eyes were full of contempt.

"Have you taken an example from Eve too, Jacob?" he shouted. "Have you descended into lechery as well?"

Jacob was dumbfounded. He had never expected such pure malice from Theophil. He quietly made his way into the church and stood before the image of the Savior.

"O compassionate One, like the prostitute who anointed Your feet so now do I offer You tears. Have mercy on me, O savior!" he uttered and broke into uncontrollable sobs.

Ham's sad howling came to him from somewhere. Theophil had probably kicked him in his inhuman rage.

The abbot came in a while later. He had put on a new, blindingly white stole with golden embroidery over his shoulders, his silk cassock blew menacingly as he walked. Ioasaf walked past Jacob and gave him a surprised look as he did – as

if he was seeing the young man for the first time.

“Jacob?!” he said. “Was it you who wanted to be a scribe, boy?”

“Yes, Father,” said Jacob, leaning down to kiss his hand.

“In the scriptorium first thing tomorrow, then. Ask for Brother Peter.”

The young man bowed low but the abbot’s words stirred nothing inside him. It was as if the long days, weeks, months spent among the animals had burned away all of his desires.

Was it possible for a man’s heart to remain indifferent when he was being raised up the ladder to the very gates of Heaven? Had Pantaleon felt the same when the devil tempted him and led him almost to the very edge of Hell?

He didn’t know. He looked around, startled, half-expecting the answers to appear out of thin air. He gazed over the soulless buildings of the monastery, the flagstones lining the courtyard, the windows of the cells which seemed to him like eyes gone blind, the dome of the church with the bare cross on top – but everything was struck dumb. Even Ham was nowhere in sight: he was the only one that would return Jacob’s gaze with playful sparks in his black eyes.

The courtyard gradually filled up. The monks gathered silently in front of the church, waiting for a sign from their abbot. Ioasaf, for his part, anxiously towered above them all as if he was just about to signal for his black flock to lift off from the ground and fly away. After a while two men led Pantaleon in. His face was pale, there was a huge blue bruise under one eye and dry blood on his lips.

“Lay him down on the threshold,” ordered the abbot and the two men pushed the novice monk roughly to the ground on his stomach. “Each and every one of you, brethren, must punish this sinner by treading on him! This is the only way to salvation for the one who has destroyed the beauty of his mind, defiled the robe of his flesh and soiled with lust, with abominable sodomy, what God has created in His image.”

Jacob looked away and took an almost imperceptible step back. While trying to hide behind the monks’ backs he could sense their impatience, even eagerness. The first monk stepped on the novice’s back and entered the church. A second monk followed, then a third, fourth, fifth and all the rest. Jacob stood still, looking intently into Pantaleon’s face, praying for his friend to find the strength to pull through. Finally it was his turn. He lifted his foot up, placed it on the part of the novice’s back he thought was the strongest, transferred his weight and stepped into the church. Once inside, he came face to face with

Ioasaf, who was reading from the holy book; the candles that burned in front of the icons created something like a gold cloud around him.

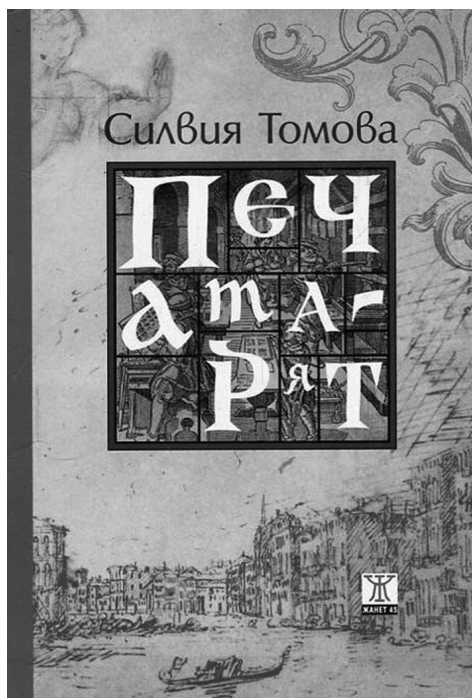
“Step forth, you wretched soul, together with your flesh, and confess before the Creator. Discard your sinful life and offer your repentant tears before God!”

Ioasaf was almost shouting and the choir beside the pulpit was singing along: “Run from the flames, O my soul! Run from the burning of Sodom! Run from the destruction caused by fire sent from God!”

“O compassionate One, as You saved Peter when he was about to sink, so reach out to me now, for a storm of evil surges around me!” The abbot gestured with his eyes for Jacob to move aside and make way for those coming after him, then went on: “Save yourself from sin, O my soul! Like Lot on the mountain, take timely refuge in the town of Zoar!”

The voices of the choir rose up once again and Jacob had the feeling that the windows of the church would burst open that very minute from their power.

“Just and benevolent God! Do not look with contempt on Your deeds and do not abandon Your creature even if I alone have sinned more than any other man, for as God to all you have the power to forgive our sins.”





Andrey VELKOV

was born in Sofia in 1977. He has a BA in Politics from Sofia University, a MA in Marketing from the University of National and World Economy and a PhD in Street Law from the Great University of Life. Andrey Velkov is a professional hedonist interested in martial arts, quantum physics, literature, heavy partying, heavy drinking, easy women, acrobatic ornithology and Zen Buddhism.



B i b l i o g r a p h y

Bulgarian Psycho, a novel (2012)

The Chronicles of the Unit, a novel (2014)

No Time Left, a novel (2016)

The Grim Reaper Is Late

Excerpt / Translated by Kalina Todorova

When they feel that the end is near, old predators withdraw deep into the jungle and wait for their death there – far away from the young animals of their species. They have lost the sharpness of their teeth and nails, their bearing is no longer the same, their fur is thinning out. The only thing they have left is their pride, which they keep until the very end. This is the reason why they choose to face the end in loneliness.

*From “Peculiarities in the Behavior and Nature of Old Predators”
by Julio Baltazar de Ponset, 16th century*

*The grown-ups are certainly very odd.
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince*

A voice came from the TV:

“It can certainly be claimed that during our term of office, the quality of life in retirement has improved dramatically...”

“Screw you all!” said Stefan to the bleached-blond cow yammering on from the screen, and stuck his middle finger, crooked from arthritis, high up in the air as a greeting. “What quality, what life are you blabbering about, you chicken head? As if you political retards understood a thing...”

He lifted his body from the chair with an effort. He dragged himself over to the TV, limping, and pressed the off button. With his middle finger – this made all the difference. Then he headed for the kitchen – he had to have a bite before getting ready to leave.

He opened the door of The Great Icy Wasteland. That was what he called his fridge and no one could deny that the name fit the bill: there was only half a loaf of bread – a bland sliced one – an open carton of yogurt, two eggs and a jar of lard, and otherwise it really was a wasteland. He took out a slice of bread, spread some lard on it, sprinkled it with salt and paprika, and that marked the end of the simple cooking show “Breakfast for the Third Age”, for which every morning he played both the showman and the audience.

He cut the slice into small bites, because his false teeth were rattling like castanets and didn't do a good job chewing. The doc had suggested that he get new ones done or buy himself a blender that would crush his food into smaller pieces, but Stefan had cut him short in a relatively polite way (as politely as he could). It was too late for him to get new teeth, he had said, and the blender could wait, because he was saving up for a yacht now and had no money for unnecessary things such as blenders and the like.

That was when the water came to the boil. He turned off the stove, took the tin pot off the hob with the worn-out oven glove and carefully poured the water over the instant coffee in his favorite mug with the Charlie Chaplin picture. He had already taken care and stirred the coffee with some water and sugar and now, after another minute of stirring, the liquid was ready to drink. It wouldn't work otherwise. If you pour the water first and only then add the instant coffee, you'll have a hard time stirring, before you manage to break the lumps.

He left the kitchen, carrying the plate with his sophisticated dish in one hand, the mug of the coffee-like liquid in the other. While trying to close the door with a kick, he almost fell down in the hallway, but kept his balance by the skin of his teeth; he just spilled a little. Although he normally kept telling himself to be careful, because breaking a leg or something at his age would be almost fatal, he couldn't help but close the door with a kick; this made a big difference somehow.

He left the plate and the mug on the coffee table by the sofa and decided to risk it with the TV once more. A scrawny young woman with a crazy-eyed look and an odd haircut was jabbering in a hysterical voice:

"To sum up for our viewers – fortunately for everyone, Mercury has started going out of retrograde and the Otter in estrus is setting in. This was written in the zodiac calendar of the Proto-Bulgarians, and as their descendants, we must take it into consideration. So, let's repeat once again – the secret to a healthy lifestyle, success and high spirits is a balanced diet and positive thinking. If we have good thoughts, we attract good things into our lives; we get fit, happy and healthy. This is the foundation on which..."

A middle finger to the off button. Click!

"The secret is up your gran's ass, sweetheart."

Stefan leaned on the sideboard, reached out for the radio and turned it on. Frank Sinatra's voice filled the room. This radio station was tried and true, they knew the good stuff.

“Nice, now things feel a bit better.”

He opened the cupboard next to the TV and took out a bottle of cheap brandy. He added a drop of it to his coffee. Then he sat down and started chewing, washing down the bites with his drink. He thought of last night. It wasn't one of his worst nights; he had got some sleep on and off, although this choppy snoozing was far from the notion of actual sleep, which he had long since forgotten.

He would usually turn off the light at around one in the morning and that was when his hardships started. The moment he finally dozed off he would either need to pee or start brooding over stuff – something highly not recommended in his situation. Every morning he would curse the Grim Reaper who had shied away from his duties and not come for him during the night. He knew it was bound to happen soon, but wondered what this pointless waiting game in the past years had been all about. Hopefully, whenever his time came, the Reaper would act fast and spare him the suffering. He didn't care about pain, which was already an old friend, but he cared like crazy about his dignity – he would never put up with humiliation.

During the long drawn-out hours he spent awake, he would often contemplate the question of what came after this and if there was “after this” at all. If the Hereafter was that lush meadow above the clouds with little chubby winged bastards twanging their harps, he'd definitely prefer to disappear for good. He found this picture terrifying because he knew that he would certainly go insane with boredom in no more than ten minutes, so he'd prefer Death to switch him off like a TV. First the button, then a black screen. Goodbye and thank you for everything.

But if it were more like Valhalla, that would be nice – a never ending feast, heavy-laden wooden tables, robust babes with blonde braids and big boobs, barrels of beer and friends all around. He could happily spend all the time in the world like this. No problem at all!

He surely mulled over the negative options, as well. The notion of hell, for example, left him unimpressed – there was nothing that could make him bat an eyelid after the past few years. The symphony of the various aches and pains he felt all the time, combined with the way of life of the average Bulgarian pensioner, made him think of hell (if there was such a thing, of course, and if someone had decided that he himself had to be sent there) as some curious change that would break the deadly routine of boredom.

And if there really was some Creator, who was the reason for the utter idiocy

that was old age – among other lovely things like wars, starvation, epidemics and so on; the list went on forever – then Stefan surely knew that this freak was something like a mad sadistic scientist with an imbecilic sense of humor and huge complexes. Fuck his creativity!

If there was no divine architect and only nature and evolution were at the bottom of old age, then both nature and evolution could go shove it up their Darwinian cunts, because the whole deal they'd done was crap. Total bullshit.

This was how his nights went – in such thoughts; many memories, both good and bad, were flooding back and all of that was accompanied by different sorts of aches. Most often he would push the dark thoughts away: he wasn't the kind of person who would give in to them; he had a sound mind, and yet they would sometimes get the upper hand. That was when things got really bad and time started dragging on even more slowly.

Then the morning came with the realization that he was still alive. He would curse Death for slacking – just like that, briskly, but roundly, instead of doing morning exercise. After that he would get out of bed slowly and carefully, because his old bones had stiffened, his joints were as if filled with barbed wire and the remains of his muscle, progressively decaying day by day, had turned to jelly during the night. Then came the agonizing morning routine; the excretory system of a man his age was as inefficient as the sewage system of Mexico City, so that was no story to be told. Then he would limp down to the kitchen, say hi to The Great Icy Wasteland and end up in front of the TV for hours on end (he couldn't really read any longer, because his eyesight was failing him). He might as well not turn off the TV – he would turn it on five minutes later, because otherwise he would be left alone with his thoughts for the whole day, which was certainly scary. For a long time he thought Turkish soap operas were the worst there was, but that was before the Indian ones started. They would leave him so numb that he could put up with almost anything afterwards. Anything but the news. He had a special attitude towards it.

This was how Stefan Dardanov lived his so-called life. But on Wednesdays, weather permitting, he would get out of the house and have coffee with his grandson, who was running a small bookshop in the city centre. And today was Wednesday indeed.



Mihail VESHIM

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

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

Some of his more significant publications include:

1990 – *Nottingham Forest* – a short story collection

1991 – *The Austrians Are Coming* – a short story collection

1992 – *Then and Now* – a Sicilian parody novel

1996 – *Bay Ganyo Returns 101 Years Later* – in collaboration with Yordan Popov and Krastyo Krastev

1998 – *The Three Muscateers* – a short story collection

1999 – *Letters from Nashington* – satirical essays

2000 – *Come to the Land of Arda* – satirical essays

2004 – *End Quote* – literary parodies

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

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

1996 - Chudomir Award – National Humorous Short Story Award

2008 - Golden Wreath Award – *Trud* newspaper's short-story award

2008 - Rayko Alexiev Award – award for comprehensive satirical work

2011 - Helikon's Flower – readers' bestseller award, for the novel *Nashington*

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

A NEW EDITION OF 64 FEUILLETONS BY MIHAIL VESHIM

Sixty-four of the funniest and most popular feuilletons by famed Bulgarian writer and journalist Mihail Veshim are gathered together in the book *Look Back in Laughter* (Ciela Publishing House). Book cover and illustrations by Professor Ivan Gadzov.

The word “feuilleton” comes from the French *feuille* which means ‘a sheet of paper’. This genre of political journalism appeared for the first time back in 1800 as a supplement to the French newspaper *Journal des Debats*; its influence grew more and more given its major task — to influence public opinion on current events through its topicality and satirically presented criticism.

One of the most popular contemporary feuilletonists in Bulgaria — writer Mihail Veshim — has gathered together 64 of his most remarkable feuilletons in the collection *Look Back in Laughter*. The satirical texts written between 1977 and 2015 are arranged in reverse chronological order. Renowned Bulgarian artist Professor Ivan Gadzov has created the cover and the illustrations in the collection.

In the introduction to his book, the author of *The English Neighbor* and *Tequilla Sunrise* says: “I like the feuilleton, I love it and I write it — sometimes once a day, at other times — once a week. And when I tally up, it turns out that I have written around several thousand texts for newspapers over the last 35 years.” To conclude, “[...] I look back in laughter in the hope that readers will look ahead in laughter, as well. Taken as a joke, life is more pleasant, trust me!”

The premiere of *Look Back in Laughter* will take place on Thursday, December 3, at 18.30 at Ciela Bookstore in the subway of Sofia University (22 Tsar Osvooboditel Blvd). The book will be presented by respected literary critic and poet Yordan Eftimov and Professor Ivan Gadzov. Popular Bulgarian musician Vasko Krapkata will make a special appearance during the event.

I'd rather write about laughing than crying, for laughter makes men human.

Francois Rabelais

A Philosophical Clash

Translated by Irina Ivanova

The media spent a whole week dealing with the scandal between Azis and Zlatka,* which took place in the *Chas Pik* night club in Sunny Beach resort... There had been various versions but only your reporter managed to get to the truth.

There has been indeed a conflict between the stars of the artistic elite of the nation mentioned above except that it didn't take place in Sunny Beach but in the National Library in Sofia. Witnesses tell the real story of what happened there:

On the evening of August 24, folk nightingale Azis is sitting in the reading room of the library, engrossed in the *Critique of Pure Reason* by Immanuel Kant. Sometime later Playmate Zlatka arrives in the company of her boyfriend Kamen "The Hook" Balbuzanov. Since all other seats are taken, they sit down in Azis' study carrel. The instant she is seated, Zlatka opens *The Phenomenology of Spirit* by Georg Friedrich Hegel and begins to pore over the revelations of the German philosopher. Her boyfriend the Hook, a notorious drug dealer in the underworld, also wishes to broaden his general knowledge and orders two works by Friedrich Schelling — *The Philosophy of Art* and *Philosophy of Revelation*.

When the books arrive, the Hook decides that before this knowledge workout, he will have a muscle-gain workout and begins with biceps exercises, a volume in each hand. His actions prompt Azis to address to him a polite remark.

"Enough with that bumpkin crap!" the nightingale from Kostinbrod chirps in the spirit of Kant, criticizing the pure and simple reason of those sitting next to him.

The remark angers Zlatka, she lifts her blonde head from the volume by Hegel and calls Azis "transvestite".

"Shut your face, hick," he says philosophically.

Restless as a result of the high dose of Hegel, Zlatka responds spontaneously and cries out: "Who are you calling a peasant?!" and then hits Azis on the head with the volume by the German classical philosopher. The nightingale has a thick head, but the volume is thick, too — the contact between the two produces

* Stars of a Bulgarian music genre known as pop-folk, an orientalist style associated with the mafia and considered very vulgar by intellectuals.

a hollow bang which attracts the attention of the other clients of the reading room. Dimitar “the Karatist” Spasov, who has just ordered a double Fichte, more specifically his works *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre* and *Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, runs to his rescue. The aim of the Karatist is to reconcile the fighting sides but the Hook deals him a pre-emptive blow with *The Philosophy of Art*. The Karatist falls to the floor and his friends, currently reading ancient Greek philosophers, rush in join the scuffle. Carrying books by Plato and Aristotle, they come to his rescue. The reading room is in turmoil. Azis, bashed with *Metaphysics* by Aristotle, begins to cry. Zlatka throws *Critique of Pure Reason* at the Karatist but hits her boyfriend the Hook instead.

Just then the bodyguards at the library intervene and put an end to the brawl which has started innocently enough and has evolved into a philosophical clash between two schools — that of the ancient Greeks and of the classical German philosophers. After the row is squelched, the participants in the clash get into their Mercedeses and go their separate ways. There are no complaints filed to the police either by the Bulgarian stars, nor by the German or the ancient Greek philosophers.

2013

A postscript from today:

The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates is selected to take part in the TV game show “Deal or No Deal”. He doesn’t want to, but his wife, evil and wicked Xanthippe, is nagging him to go — she needs the money.

Here’s Socrates in the television studio. The host shows him boxes hiding mouthwatering sums and asks him foolproof questions. If he answers correctly, the wise man can win one of the sums. But instead of giving easy answers, the philosopher keeps silent.

“Well, Socrates! What a pity!” the host says regretfully to him. “What can I do for you?”

Socrates opens his mouth and asks for one thing only — the poison hemlock. The pretty assistant of the host presents it to him.

The ancient Greek philosopher drinks the poison hemlock while on air, the beauty takes his arm and accompanies him behind the scenes where he can die.

“Don’t fetch me such windbags anymore!” the show’s producer grumbles as he nervously follows the fluctuating viewer ratings.

Harvest Time

A co-production of E. Pelin* and M. Veshim

Harvest was in full swing in the clubs on the flat plain of Sofia. From one end to the other, as far as the eye could see, the golden fields of cannabis swayed, and tired workers moved hither and thither from early dawn. The Lord sent terrible heat on the sound these days. The lighting effects were fiery and merciless but their burning rays did not drive the industrious youths from the club fields. They reaped there continuously, piling up the golden sheaves of Indian hemp. Sweat poured from their foreheads, their spirits were low, but there was no rest. Ripe cannabis will not wait.

In those hectic days, under the infernal rays of the projectors, *Metropolis* tracks echoed rising in techno waves right up to the sky, like thankful prayers. Powerful bangs and decibels rose together somewhere at the end of the plain, a song intensified through thousands of watts soared up — young, free, as broad as the plain and as sacred as love.

DJ Nikola A laid down a heavy sheaf of cannabis, and listened long behind the desk. Then, smiling and energetic, he would watch his old mother and little sister shooting up all alone.

His sister would pop an ecstasy pill and tease him gaily: “Brother, you can’t distinguish Penka’s voice with those loudspeakers all around!”

“I catch it... but faintly; if you mix it on the computer, turn up the sound and play it through the speakers, the vocal is lost!” DJ Nikola A answered, then added: “Mother, rest a while, and listen to them! If you hear Penka’s voice in that din, you’ll know that she really will be your daughter-in-law!”

His old mother straightened up, took her dose of Lexotan, smiled lovingly at him and bopped to the music:

“If you can’t tell her voice, how am I to do it, my son?”

“Let her sing alone — and I’d know her even if she were singing across the sea.” But with *Metropolis* around — even an experienced DJ like Nikola A found it difficult.

But suddenly from the far lounge, a drugged barefooted boy came running to say that Penka had died of an overdose.

The dreadful news flew from mouth to mouth all over the club plain of cannabis.

* This is a parody of a well-known short-story by classic Bulgarian writer Elin Pelin (1877-1949) about a girl who dies of sunstroke when peasants are out reaping the fields.

Dj Nikla, stupefied and desperate, pushed the crowd aside, and fell stoned beside her dead body.

“Penka, my technojoy, my technosong!”

His voice choked with sobs, again in the techno style.

The following night the lights shone as strongly and cruelly as ever, and the sound of *Metropolis* was booming to the heavens. But there were not workers out in the cannabis fields. The golden ears shed their grain and burned in solitude.

The plain of Indian hemp was holding a sad holiday.

They were burying Penka the supermodel.





Vladimir ZAREV

was born on October, 5, 1947, in Sofia, in the family of the famous historian and literary critic Academic Panteley Zarev. He graduated in Bulgarian language and literature from Sofia University. He is currently an editor-in-chief of the most prestigious literary magazine in Bulgaria *Savremennik* (“Contemporary”). His works have been translated into Czech, Polish, Hungarian, Romanian and Turkish.

Among his works are the novels *The Day of Impatience* (1977), *The Trial* (1984), *The Hound* (1987), *The Hound Versus the Hound* (1990), *Annum Dei 1850* (1988), *Ruin* (2003), *Father Bogomil and the Perfection of Fear* (2004), *Worlds* (2008), the *Genesis* trilogy – *Genesis* (1983), *The Exit* (1983) and *The Choice* (1986), revised version published in 2012 as *The Law*, and *Eagles' Bridge* (2015).

In 2014 some of his most famous works were reprinted by Hermes Publishing House: the historical novel *Annum Dei 1850*, the novel *Worlds*, based on a true story, as well as the bestseller *Ruin* which had already had the impressive number of ten reprints. *Ruin* was translated into German and published in 2006 by Kiepenheuer & Witsch. According to Deutsche Welle Radio, it is the most successful Bulgarian book ever published in German. In *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Ruin* was reviewed as “the novel of change across Eastern Europe”, while Zarev was dubbed “the Bulgarian Balzac”.

The *Genesis* trilogy: *Genesis* (1983), *The Exit* (1983) and *The Law* (2012), has enjoyed wide popularity in Bulgaria. It is a masterful account of the historical events in Bulgaria from the beginning of the twentieth century until the present. Zarev intertwines a family saga with all its twists and turns with the fateful changes in the history of Bulgaria. In 2013 TV7 showed a TV series, based on the trilogy, called “The Tree of Life”.

The latest novel by Vladimir Zarev – *Eagles' Bridge*, was published in 2015.

The protests at Eagles' Bridge. The spark in people's eyes. The fury and hope that the ruling political class can be swept away, and so can the monopolies, the oligarchs. People, gathering again and again in the freezing cold winter nights.

In the lingering troubled times of political change, the establishment – regardless of party affiliations – did not only pillage Bulgaria, they did something even worse. Hundreds of thousands of people lost their savings, homes and jobs; they lost their present and future. The guilty were known but there was no retribution. The ruling political class was turning their power into money with a greedy perseverance, but there was still no retribution. Nor was there justice.

This is the background against which the beautiful, yet impossible love story of Pavel and Julia is told by Vladimir Zarev. The two are among the people in charge of the protests. Both of them have their own past, their fears, sins and dreams. Pavel is a lawyer, who has earned a lot of money but has lost his true self. Julia has divorced her husband and seeks footing in her small gallery and the upbringing of her daughter. She truly believes in the idealist force driving the protests. Pavel and Julia gradually shorten the distance between them. Their love is passionate and gentle, but it also painful. When Pavel shares his dark secret, everything breaks into pieces.

Eagles' Bridge

Excerpt / Translated by Kalina Todorova

Two months after they sold their house in the village of Yana, it became clear that the “City of the Future” would never be built and that this wonderful futuristic dream was, in fact, a flagrant deceit, the latest misleading pyramid scheme. It turned out that according to the contracts signed by thousands of prospective flat owners, Angelle’s company didn’t owe them a refund in case of failure; in fact, it didn’t owe them anything but its humble apology. Pavel’s father took time off work; together with his son he spent fifteen days running around Angelle’s offices, raging, pleading and imploring the pretty girls, who looked as if they’d come straight out of *Playboy*, to get at least some of their money back; then the girls were gone and the deserted offices were locked up.

Pavel refrained from blaming his father, it was pointless; these disastrous calamitous contracts were also signed by university lecturers, by presumably experienced entrepreneurs, famous actors and all sorts of enlightened artists and professors, even lawyers had signed them. Every dream, no matter how naïve, is greater than reality, because it encompasses our sublime yearnings, our inner light and radiance.

Around this time, after the “City of the Future” was solemnly and irretrievably dead, a horrible series of bankruptcies ensued – Slavyani Bank went bankrupt, so did First Private Bank and Agribusiness Bank, and finally Mollov Bank was declared insolvent in an equally inglorious and cruel way. Pavel’s father took time off again, he waited helplessly at its headquarters for a couple of long days; at first the girls were giving evasive responses and vague hopes to the thousands of weary clients, who in despair were flooding the parking lot in front of the bank. Then Mollov’s shutters were put up, it was just the guards left: ten or more tough guys with shaven heads, gold chains and tattooed biceps that were giving people dirty looks, as if they were the ones who had committed the crime and had made the bank go bankrupt by investing their money in it, without even thinking.

Then, there was that one thing that drove Pavel mad with rage, that changed his life forever and forced him to cultivate his anger, to tame his anger and fury, as if they were wild animals and to turn their vehement irrationality, first into information, then into benefit, and in the end – into a quiet, but steady creed. Into a fateful ever-lasting human creed.

On this terrifying day Pavel was in Sofia, studying for an exam in Roman law, so it was only later that he found out what had happened, from the jumbled patch-like stories of his co-tenants in the dormitory – a gloomy damp building consisting of an endless corridor with rooms on both sides, a shared kitchen and a dilapidated bathroom, saturated with the smell of mold, tiles missing.

It wasn't a warm day, they said, yet, it was bright and sunny; almost all the tenants were out on the benches in the rampant wilting grass. Some of the children were playing football, dust rising from under their feet, others were cycling around; some of the women were drinking coffee, two of them had curlers in their hair; the men were sitting in their vests only, enjoying the cold beer they could get from the kiosk across the road.

Pavel's mother was there as well, she didn't stick out in any way, it seemed like she expected nothing, but could patiently endure anything; she was just sitting on the bench among the chattering women, looking towards the setting sun, not so much to see it off as to emphasize her own absence from the situation. She was sitting like this for an hour or two, it was slowly getting dark when from behind the corner of the pastry shop with its sickly sweet smell filling the air, his father appeared. Pavel's father was wearing a suit with his tie tight around his neck; his shoes were dusty. "But he didn't look like someone going home," one of the women told him. "He rather seemed like a man who had set out for some place in the unknown, some place with the night setting in, very far away from here."

Then Pavel's mother took notice of him, she fixed her hair, her eyes filled with fear, she stood up, walked over to him, there was nothing petty or peevish about her bearing; "for a moment we thought they would pass each other," the woman added, "that they both simply wouldn't recognize each other, your father was looking straight ahead and swallowing dryly, his Adam's apple was trembling, his eyes were distant, his mouth contorted as if he wanted to say something, but was short of breath."

"I've lost everything!" said his father quietly, although it felt like he was screaming.

"And now?" asked his mother humbly, even apologetically.

"Now I'll show you what for!"

And then time stood still; all of a sudden, his father grew bigger, there was a strong whiff of sweat, he started dripping with sweat and a smell of violence set in. His rage was so unexpected, all-encompassing and uncontrollable that he grabbed his mother by the hair, then loosened his tie and started hitting her.

His fists reaching her face, sliding down her neck, slamming against her chest; at first, she let out a sob, then pursed her lips and fell silent.

“As if she was made of wax. She was so implausibly and selflessly silent,” said the woman, “that at some point I thought we were watching a silent film.”

In his self-oblivion, he hit her again and again, foam came to his lips, blood gushed out of her mouth, he was under the sway of his rage, the kind of impossible sweeping rage, which can be felt only by a horribly good man, a perfectly good and merciful man...

