

Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2019

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Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2019: *Ten Books from Bulgaria*

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Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2019

Ten Books from Bulgaria



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Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2019



Angel Mitev
Executive Director
National Palace of Culture –
Congress Centre Sofia

Preface

Dear READER,

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

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

In fact, there has been a positive shift over the past two decades, and you might have already had a chance to become acquainted with some representatives of contemporary Bulgarian literature. The National Book Centre at the National Palace of Culture – Congress Centre Sofia has put

together this small book, not only a catalogue but also an anthology, to help you navigate your literary quest and to make your further introduction to contemporary Bulgarian literature easier and more enjoyable.

Here you can get a taste of ten titles from female and male contemporary Bulgarian writers, published in their original language within the scope of the current and the previous year (2019-2018), presented here in superb English translation. We consider them masterful, witty, and intriguing. We hope you will share our opinion.

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

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

Republic of Bulgaria

NATIONAL PALACE OF CULTURE

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

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

NATIONAL BOOK CENTRE

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

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

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

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

Complete information is available at <http://ndk.bg> or upon request at nbc@ndk.bg.

Ten Books from Bulgaria



Elena ALEXIEVA

is the author of 13 books, including the short story collections *Readers' Group 31*, *Who* and *Pets Syndicated*, as well as the novels *Knight*, *The Devil and Death*, *The Nobel Laureate*, and others. As a playwright, she has received the Askeer and Ikar national awards for new Bulgarian drama, as well the Award of the Society of Independent Theatre Critics in Bulgaria. Her plays have been collected in two volumes, *Angel Fire* (2014) and *Victims of Love* (2015). She is also winner of the Helikon Prize for modern Bulgarian fiction.

Her books have been translated into French, Spanish, Russian and Serbian. She has been a contributor to numerous journals and anthologies in English, French, German, Polish, etc.

Saint Wolf is Elena's latest novel.

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

SAINT WOLF

A novel

Synopsis

One night a lone traveler gets off the train supposed to take him to the sea. Instead, he finds himself in an illegal mine where scientists-turned-miners, side by side with the inhabitants of a whole underground town, are busy mining coal. Here, the traveler meets his friend, pupil and traitor, the scientist Kolimechkov. As they dig, the bowels of the earth are shaken by an explosion. The traveler and Kolimechkov start off in search of the rock fall, only to end up at an extravagant gypsy wedding in an underground town.

Sometime later, Boginya, the brave and resolute librarian of a dying mountain village, receives an unexpected visit from a bizarre stranger. He may well be her last reader. As she takes him home, Boginya finds out that weird as he is, he might well be the savior of the village, whose mayor has devised a secret plot to sell it and turn it into the most luxurious home for the elderly in Europe. To ensure the success of his plan, the mayor needs to win the favor of the country's president. And the only way to do this would be to organize a wolf hunt and make sure that the president kills five wolves in ten minutes to beat the world record and boost his self-esteem as the head-of-state of a small and insignificant country. In this, the stranger has his own role to play.

Higher up the mountain, an odd American woman is building a church. A strange man she has never seen before begins hanging around. One day he runs across an even stranger priest, Father Bayrakov, in whom he recognizes his one-time comrade, the scientist Kolimechkov. The latter believes he has found God, or at least is on His trail, and so he is helping the American build the church. Gradually, the stranger, wrapped in silence and mystery, becomes suspicious and unwanted.

A dark, funny, extraordinary story of Bulgaria here and now, transformed by the journey of a man – a saint or a lunatic – after whom nothing and no one would ever be the same.



SAINT WOLF

Excerpt / Translated by Annie Dancheva

Boginya¹ fanned the fire again, making frybread on the stove. She had pulled a purple dressing gown over her thick flannel nightgown and had a green terrycloth towel wrapped around her head like a turban. She had washed her hair in an attempt to chase away the remnants of the night and remove the traces of sleeplessness. Her tight face gleamed unnaturally under a thick layer of morning make-up and only her freshly plucked eyebrows stood out in painful redness. But Boginya had no illusions about her beauty; she put her efforts into another area of life entirely. She had other much more important affairs to tend to and they were what she strove to be worthy of.

¹ The name means “goddess” in Bulgarian.

When she pushed the door open and loomed up in the doorway like a queen, the wanderer thought to himself that there was no resemblance between the woman he was seeing then and the one he had met at the library the day before. He even got a bit scared. He remembered what the old man had told him when they parted – he hadn't had enough time to forget his words, and the despair in their wisdom made his skin crawl. But the old man, if nothing else, prudently had his cave to hide in. While the wanderer was defenseless against the woman and her magnetic forcefulness, so he simply pulled the duvet back over his head, turned to the wall and said nothing.

"Breakfast is ready," Boginya announced and fell silent as if she expected to hear trumpets blaring and to see three white doves flying away. Neither of the men moved. She coughed and threw an impatient look at each of the two beds. Boginya noticed the wooden bowl and spoon lying on the floor and picked them up with a muffled sigh. She tried to save herself whatever domestic labor she could – she didn't feel it was her calling – but she never managed to do as little as she wanted. The woman examined the spoon critically, breathed on it and energetically rubbed it against her dressing gown. Then she left it on the window sill along with the bowl and coughed again. "I'm not going to the library today. I took a leave of absence. I'll be home all day, so. . . Breakfast is ready."

Boginya went back to the kitchen, but left the door open. As the warmth came in, the smell of fried food flooded the room. The wanderer was locked in a fight with himself. He still refused to push off the blanket even though his soul was already agonizing. His stomach was agonizing, too – it had long been drained of the last nutritious molecule of the slice of bread he had eaten the previous night, he had used it up in his sleep. As a destitute and downtrodden person, the wanderer wasn't in the habit of resisting happiness for long, and soon thereafter he gave up and crawled out of bed. Hidden in his cave, the old man did not hear him sneak out – the wanderer hadn't slipped his boots on. He only heard the door close and then waited, but no one called for him. It struck him that Boginya had never made frybread for him, apparently she did not consider him worthy of her love. He shed a few tears at the thought. Then he dozed off and completely vanished in his slumber – so thin had become the thread that linked him to life.

As she watched the wanderer annihilate one piece of frybread after another, Boginya drank her tea and made plans for the future. She skipped breakfast as a rule. Morning meals upset her stomach. Her nervousness did her digestion no good, and she preferred not to ruin her day with gastric misfortune early on. She

did not grasp the human proclivity for having regular meals and that was one of her main objections to extraterrestrial intellect. Never in her life had Boginya cooked for herself only. She was a stranger to the joys of food. She was a woman, and women drew their strength from other sources. Watching the man eating, sitting across from her, she didn't feel the least bit of fondness. There was, instead, cold deliberation etched on her face mixed with laconic surprise.

"Don't eat so fast," she advised. "You'll regret it."

The wanderer just nodded in silence and kept on wolfing down the food. Hunger had gotten the best of him, and he had eventually resigned himself to its power. His mind registered his downfall, but his stomach led him into transcendence. He had thought he was at home with starvation, but he had been fooling himself, believing that a slice of dry bread could satisfy all of his needs. It turned out that he didn't know himself very well. He was no saint, just an ordinary vagrant.

Soon after, transcendence overwhelmed him, transforming into dizziness. There were two pieces of frybread left on the plate in front of him. He stared at them, helpless, goggle-eyed with the fullness in his stomach, and little by little he grew to hate them.

"I told you you'd regret it," Boginya said and covered the plate with an empty one and put it in the fridge. "Go lie down, it'll pass."

"No," the wanderer protested and for the first time she saw a man who'd had too much to eat act like one who'd had too much to drink. "I'd better go."

"Stay and rest. What's the hurry? Is anyone waiting for you?"

It had never occurred to him that movement across time and space could have as its prime reason and end point another human being. In his head there wasn't any connection between the two and that made Boginya's suggestion all the more puzzling to him.

"No one is waiting for me. Only the bench. There's plenty of time, though. They'll call for me when the time comes."

She looked skeptical.

"Which bench? The one you were lying on yesterday?"

The wanderer tried to laugh at the woman's stupidity, but he couldn't. His whole body was paralyzed by the abundant surge of nutrients.

"No," he said feebly. "Another one."

Once she saw she couldn't persuade him to do her bidding, Boginya stopped grilling him and left him alone. She did the kitchen chores half-heartedly and then, unbothered, took the towel off her head. The rough wet stringy-looking

hair dangled down her shoulders. Now that the man had already been conquered, she didn't need a queen's tiara on her head to rule over him.

The wanderer sat there, motionless, for a long time. He had lost his urge to do anything. He had lost even his ability to walk. The food had taken up all the space inside of him and, to his surprise, he found that he wasn't growing any stronger, but rather weaker and half-conscious.

What's going on here, he asked himself. That woman tamed me as easy as pie. What's worse is that I tamed myself. She put me to bed, gave me a plate of food and the deal is done! Now she'll fatten me up and then she'll brick me up here for good to decorate her house.

He got dead scared and made up his mind at once. His body felt heavy, his soul felt even heavier, yet he rose to his feet, went to the other room and slipped on his boots. Then he called the old man who had curled up in his cave like a bear, already awake, waiting to see what would happen. He had decided to play dead if he had to. He hoped that if he couldn't play on the woman's love, he could at least play on her conscience. Once she was already marinating in guilt, the old man would come back to life and light her soul up. He found his plan quite ingenious, he had even started rehearsing. So he didn't respond much to the wanderer's calls.

"Give me the fur cloak, old man. I'm leaving."

The old man could hardly believe what he had heard and strained his ears to hear better. But the wanderer saw through the old man's artifice, shoved aside the rags decisively and peeked into the cave.

"Give me the fur cloak, you promised. Make it fast 'cause I need to go."

The old man blinked in pleasure. He wanted to enjoy the taste of his easy victory, but the wanderer's hastiness dampened his spirit. Yet, the old man thought of yet another trick to pull and smacked his lips in pleasure.

"I won't give it to you. Walk off as you are."

The wanderer stopped to think.

"Like I care. With or without that fur cloak, I'm leaving. I can't stay here anymore. I'll waste away here."

The old man saw the wanderer was serious, so he got serious, too.

"I can't get up. My clothes are weighing down on me. Pull it out from underneath me. I've been lying on top of it all night, it'll be all warmed up."

The wanderer complied. The fur cloak was indeed big and very warm. Then he piled the rags back on top of the old man as if nothing had happened.

In the meantime, Boginya had dried her hair and had started preparing the bath. She had really put her mind to giving the man a more human look, so she

didn't have to feel ashamed once it was time to show him to the world. She intended to commit her entire day to that noble ordeal. And how deeply surprised she was when she returned to the kitchen only to find it empty. When she saw the boots were gone, too, reality hit her. In fact, she had expected something of the sort. After all, she hadn't read all those books and buried two men in vain.

He gorged himself on frybread and felt a surge of courage, she told herself dispassionately. When his belly starts churning tonight, he'll come beg me to take him back.

The wanderer had hit the road with a vigorous step, but soon all of his new-found strength left him. He felt strange with all the fullness and warmth inside of him. The distance he had walked was so short that it seemed he hadn't really gone far. He was just as close to Boginya's home.

She's calling me back, he thought.

Since her guest had gone away and she didn't want all her efforts around the bath to go to waste, Boginya set about giving the old man a bath. She loaded the stove with as many logs as it could hold and went over to drag the old man out of his lair.

"Get up!" she commanded. "You're having a bath."

Boginya knew very well just how much the old man despised taking baths and that he would never agree to have one voluntarily. He would spit and bare his teeth at her, he had even bitten her once. She approached his bed cautiously. True to his newly invented tactics, the old man pretended to be dead. Boginya snatched at the blankets and dropped them on the floor. The old man refused to budge an inch. She got flustered. Not that she took the bait, but it seemed to her that he had shrunk completely. She rarely had the chance to see him like that, full size. He would stay huddled in his lair, trying not to get in her way.

Could it be that he fears me, the question crossed her mind. The thought was absurd and Boginya shooed it away. The look of that little old man saddened her. His body was no bigger than that of an undergrown child and everything in him seemed worn out and wizened as though he had been steeped in water for a long time and then left to dry in the sun, forgotten. She could vaguely remember the man who once occupied that shrunken shadow of a body. The little old man sighed in his eternal slumber and gave himself away. Boginya gave him a thin, bloodless smile in response, exhausted from all these vigils. If she wanted, she could pick him up in her arms and carry him to the bathroom, light as he was.

"Come on, get up," she repeated, resigned. "I can see there's nothing wrong with you."

The old man opened his eyes. They had long been veiled by cataracts that had made them empty and luminous.

“Not yet,” he mumbled, “soon.”

“That’s what you always say,” Boginya laughed and scooped him up off the bed.

The old man laughed back. He got lost in dreams about death, the real one this time. It looked to him white, sweet and thick like the glass of milk that Boginya would sometimes pour him for breakfast. The old man wanted to sink deeply in it. The only thing that bothered him was that he would no longer breathe – how could that be? That part wasn’t quite clear to him. He was old, yes, but he wanted to breathe all the time, even when he slept. It was his strongest desire and he couldn’t imagine what it would be like if it disappeared.

There must be something there, he thought, it can’t be a big nothing.

“Just don’t scald me, you hear?” he cautioned.

“I won’t scald you,” she reassured him. “I’ll bury you the way you are.”

She took his clothes off and threw them in a basin. The old man was left stark naked. He felt no shame about his tiny aged body, he shifted from foot to foot, impatient to feel the hot water poured all over him.

I’ll be damned, who knew he could be so obedient, she thought to herself with a degree of disquietude and soaped his head.

“The new shoes, don’t forget to put them on my feet,” the old man said and sneezed – he had soap in his nose.

Boginya grabbed the big sponge and started rubbing his body. He could hardly stand on his feet, his frame wobbled back and forth. She propped him up so he wouldn’t tumble over, and kept rubbing his skin until he started squeaking.

“Stop, stop!”

He was pink from head to toe and looked like a newborn. Now he had a pleasant odor. Boginya took a proud look at what she had done. Then she grabbed a large towel and draped it around him. She drew him into the kitchen and seated him by the stove.

“I’ll die soon,” the old man informed her gleefully.

“Have your breakfast first,” she offered and took the plate with the two pieces of frybread out of the cupboard.

The old man was thrilled at all this attention.

So she loves me after all, the old man thought and bit off small chunks of the bread one by one, chewing slowly, letting his delight show. Boginya did her chores and occasionally glanced at him to make sure he hadn’t burnt himself on

the stove. The old man loved warmth; he always sought to stay close to the fire. Done with breakfast, content, he wiped his mouth with the corner of the towel.

“It’s best when it’s just the two of us. We don’t need other people.”

“There aren’t other people here,” Boginya responded without turning around.

“You think I don’t know, but I do,” the little old man hinted slyly. “You want to remarry. But, please, wait until I die. My heart will burst if you don’t.”

He sniffed half-jokingly, half-honestly.

You’re as stupid as a child and just as naïve, Boginya thought. It touched her to see just how much old age suited him. Seeing him like that, she finally managed to figure out why she couldn’t remember him as a man. Even in his younger years he had never stood out from the rest. He had been patiently waiting to reach the prime of his life. She believed that every person had a prime time in their life and that time didn’t necessarily have to be their youth. There he was, he had now reached his.

Boginya felt pleased with her epiphany. The clouds that had shrouded her head were finally gone, she had long been plagued by remorse.

“Listen,” she told him. “I’ll tell you something, but don’t be angry because it’s the plain truth and it’s no use being angry at what’s true. You’re no good as a man any more, but you’d make a wonderful little kid.”

The old man clapped his hands, delighted at the idea. It was a good deal, as well as a natural one. For a long time now – ever since he had advanced quite a bit in age – he never stopped wondering why he continued walking on his way even though the way was no longer there. Now he knew why and he celebrated his luck. He was going to be mourned and loved even more than before. For once he felt important. His cheeks, heated by the hot bath, beamed like red apples.

“I might live another year or two, you know,” he announced. “You might even die before me. There’s no fixed order when it comes to this.”

“No, there isn’t,” Boginya agreed.

“And then,” the old man went on, “you’ll leave the house to me. Who knows, I might decide to remarry.”

Boginya laughed. Worried as she was, suddenly her good humor came back. A whirlwind of feelings beat against her chest and once it reached her face, it made her look prettier. She went to the other room to take a change of clean clothes. Then she dried him well and dressed him up like a doll. He looked pleasant to the eye. Boginya sat down across from him to contemplate the sight for a while. Then she took him to his bed and piled the blankets back on top of him.

“I’m going out,” she warned him. “Be a good boy while I’m gone.”

The old man winked at her.
“Off again to see your lover?”
“Yes, again.”

The old man went silent. He searched in his heart for the bitterness he felt a while ago, but it was nowhere to be found.

“Don’t take too long, though, you hear me?” he pleaded. “I’ll get hungry very soon.”

“I won’t,” Boginya promised.

He was alone now. The bath and the breakfast had drained him completely. He closed his eyes and imagined he was a precious object closed in a small coffer. Everyone was looking for him, yet no one could find him. Only he knew where he was. And there it was – gone – the last of his cares in life. Now that he couldn’t think of anything else to complain about, he felt like being naughty. But naughtiness took strength he no longer had. So he just took a nap. Sleep overtook him and pulled him tight in its embrace as though he was a suckling. Soon after, fragments of his childhood floated towards him and he dreamt of his future, considerably disguised by his dream as the past so as not to scare him.



Emiliya DVORYANOVA

was born in 1958 in Sofia. She graduated from the Bulgarian National School of Music, where she studied piano performance. She did not continue with a musical career, however, because at age 16 she wrote her first novel (unpublished) and discovered her future career as a writer. Dvoryanova continued her studies at Sofia University, where she earned a doctoral degree in Philosophy. Her dissertation, titled “The Aesthetic Essence of Christianity,” was quite controversial for Communist Bulgaria and provoked a number of disputes and issues. She managed to defend her doctoral work in 1991, only after the fall of Communism in Bulgaria.

Dvoryanova’s career as a writer began in 1989. Her first literary works were written back in the 1980s, but remained unpublished due to the communist regime. Her first published novel, written in 1985, came out in 1993. Dvoryanova has also worked at the New Bulgarian University, where she taught essay writing and creative writing, and established a Master’s program in Creative Writing. In 2012 she became an Associate Professor in Theory and History of Literature.

The central themes in Dvoryanova’s writing are music, philosophy, and religion, and they intertwine thematically and polyphonically in all of her works. Language, and the music within it, is what drives her writings, and many of her books have the structure of musical works in which the words unfold to the limit of their sound.

Emiliya Dvoryanova is one of the most distinguished and translated contemporary Bulgarian novelists.

PEACE BE WITH YOU

Synopsis

W o r k s :

The House (Areta Publishers, 1993)

Passion, or the Death of Alice (Obsidian Publishers, 1995)

La Velata (Fea Publishers, 1998)

Mrs. G (Fea Publishers, 2001)

The Virgin Mary's Earthly Gardens (Obsidian Publishers, 2006)

Concerto for Sentence: An Exploration of the Musico-Erotic, (Obsidian Publishers, 2008)

Besides Literature (Paradigma, 2011)

At the Doors of the Sea (Obsidian Publishers, 2015)

Peace Be with You, (Obsidian Publishers, 2018)

P u b l i c a t i o n s i n o t h e r l a n g u a g e s :

Passion ou las morte d'Alissa translated by Marie Vrinat, editions federop 2006

Les Jardins interdit translated by Marie Vrinat, editions aden, 2010

Mme G to be published in French in 2012, translation by Marie Vrinat, editions aden

Concerto for a Sentence—An Endeavor in the Musical-Erotic, to be translated by Elitza Kotzeva and published in 2015 by Dalkey Archive Press, to be translated by Marie Vrinat and published in 2015 by Ecole Normale, Paris, France

Диалогия – Концерт для слова; У входа в море, Центр книги Рудомино, 2016, перевод Зои Карцевой

Mondalkoncert, Napkut Kiado, Budapest, 2016

A w a r d s :

At the Doors of the Sea – 13 Centuries of Bulgaria National Literature Award for Bulgarian Novel, 2015

The Virgin Mary's Earthly Gardens – Hristo G. Danov National Literature Award, 2006

Passion, or the Death of Alice – Ognishte Literature Award, 1996

The world, as described in this novel, seems to have suffered a cataclysmic catastrophe. The land has gone back to being dry and deserted, and the world itself, called so residually, as even it does not remember what it truly is, is almost gone. Some remnants of mankind still exist, there is some human presence, but it has lost its divine youth and integrity, and even the memory of them, abandoned, barely surviving, settled in the equilibrium of inevitable wasteland. The cataclysm (whenever it was and how it happened is not even mentioned) has long passed, the screams and the horrors have long been silenced, no memory of them exists anymore... Any surplus, any excess has diminished and has shrunk into only what is most essential: bread, water, sometimes rainwater, berries and roots, grapes.

As the text progresses, however, the readers experience their own internal transformation, as they ponder the question: Is the inner matrix of this book a utopia or dystopia?

The first part of the novel introduces the reader to a mountain village, the home of some forty people, and a hill with remnants of a monastery, where the main heroine Mo lives. The village is surrounded by a fence, which is meant to protect it against the raids of outsiders who used to steal even the most useless things, but no one has come for many years and the village keeps on surviving, closed off within itself, keeping within it a kind of residual world.

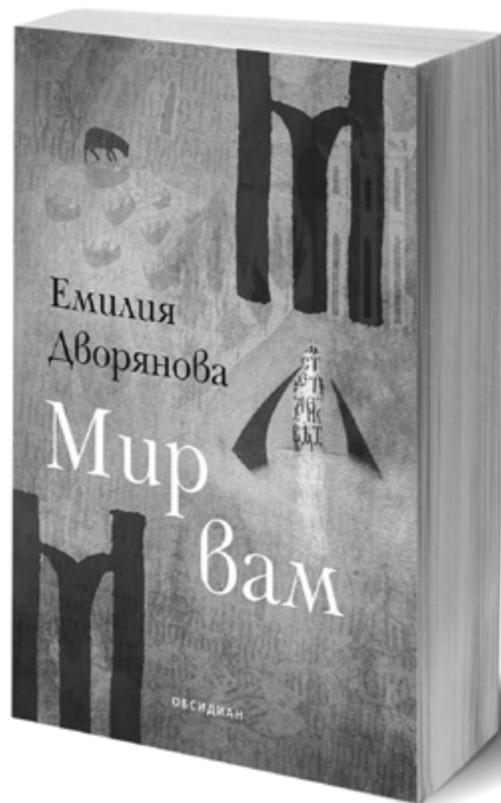
At the center of the village there is a pub with an electricity generator and a television. When the electricity is on, static comes on the screen. One day, however, when the villagers turn on the generator, something appears on the screen other than static, something resembling an image. It is unclear, blurry, and mumbles something incomprehensible, but this occurrence causes distress to the villagers, forcing them to ask themselves “is there a world out there” or “is there nothing?”

The village elder, a woman named Ut, the only one who remembers the world from before, decides to instruct Mo, the youngest, to venture outside the village and find out what is going on. Mo's task is to climb down the mountain, walk seven days in one direction, then come back and share with the villagers what she has seen. Mo goes on this journey, carrying only a bag full of bread, a water flask, and a book Ut gives her to keep her safe. The book contains the psalms of David, which, despite the fact that Mo can barely read, will prove the most crucial for her survival.

The second part of the novel tells the story of Mo's journey. Upon her descent from the mountain, Mo enters into a deserted, flat, hopeless world. At every step, Mo's survival seems more and more at risk, but at the same time signs of a presence melt away the anxiety from the beginning of the novel.

This happens not through the events of those seven days there and seven days back, where, in her search for humanity, Mo encounters a drifter, a deserted human body, and heads back to herself, but through the gradual kneading of language into perfectly specific psalm poetics. Thus, the text begins to act as an overlay, as its words conjure up additional meaning as they are uttered out loud. The novel goes on to constructively build and consecutively recreate psalm motifs and images, such as the metaphors of life as a sea, the child that has been found, the prudent prison-salvation, the mortality of the body, for trusting not in the flesh, but in the spirit...The ideological Christian uber-truth (through the many uses and quotations of micro texts from the psalms and prayer books) is intertwined, at a tissue level, with a medieval-apocryphal literality. Signs and images from Old Testament antiquity peep out in almost every line of Mo's journey. The reader is destined to take in with all of his senses the sensuality of David's words.

Does Mo reach anything? How far does she go? The third part of the novel takes her into a world covered with glass, protecting it from sunlight, from rain, from the sky, from diseases and from death. A world in which people die only when they want to. How will Mo perceive this world? Will she be able to accept it at all? Will she even be able to call it a "world," and what does it even mean to be or not to be a "world"? Mo's return gives answers to these questions, which each and every reader will have to find and explain within themselves.



PEACE BE WITH YOU

Excerpt / Translated by Desislava Toncheva

● ● ● they dreamed till sunrise, when Mo got up, went out and saw that the aster flowers were in bloom. A blue one, a red one and a white one. She then woke the child up, helped him put on his dry shirt, took out a loaf of bread, took the child by the hand and took him to the gate where she had found him. The child did not know why, but he followed her without question. The two of them sat down on the doorstep, Mo broke the bread and handed it to him. "Eat," she said. "And keep an eye out. We're waiting for them."

The child took a bite out of the bread and gazed in the direction Mo was looking at: the green meadow, the path leading away from it, wandering off into the shadows of the woods. There were no sheep, not the usual one, two, three, and then one more, but it did not matter, because sometimes, in the summer, the green looks as if it will never end, like the sheep will feed on it forever and nothing will ever end. This illusion is just a trace of the gentle pastures abiding in one's soul, and the trace really abided in that moment, sealed by the night's sleep, because Mo finally had someone to talk to, and the child had someone to be silent with and they both took advantage of this opportunity. Mo's need to be audible had no end, her words had tangled up in her vocal cords and she needed to untangle them, so she decided to explain to the child what they were waiting for as they were waiting.

"We are waiting for Ut," she said, "She will lead the whole village here, how many I cannot count, because they all have different faces and names that I do not remember, but someone else probably remembers them, they come because of the aster flowers, because only three of them bloom here, we cannot breed them like other flowers, they are just like people, who cannot be bred unless they decide to give birth or to settle. There are no other flowers like these in the whole area, they have somehow planted themselves here and bloom only on a specific day, no one knows exactly which day that will be, but Ut has chosen a day and from that day we count all the others, so that none of them is lost, Ut counts them, and now I will tell you how this happens: Ut will bring the golden Book, we will sit around the aster flowers, she reads some, but from the Book, because its letters are strange and no one knows them, then she will pick the aster flowers and put them inside the Book to dry, three flowers for each year, to mark the time

between the pages, three between each page, and so, by counting them, we know how many years have passed, three counts for one, and the Book is thick, so it will be enough for all the years...”

Mo got a bit confused in her explanation and paused to think about this way of counting, then she remembered the chimneys, which count one for two because there was no chimney without a house, and here was the opposite, you count three flowers but it is one, one year has passed, the blossoms have dried up and nothing can happen to them anymore, they are beyond time. This understanding gave her some inner peace and she opened her mouth to continue, but in that moment she found the brass ball in her pocket, which she had completely forgotten about, because it wasn't useful for anything. She took it out and handed it to the child,

“Here, take this,” she said. “It could be a toy.”

The child took the brass ball, squeezed it in his fist, and did not let go of it anymore, and just like that the ball became useful, and Mo contemplated how the fabric of the world changed its properties, but she said nothing because these thoughts were not for meant children.

As they kept waiting, she quieted down to let the child speak to the ball. The sun was rising, it was getting warm and Mo squinted her eyes, feeling peaceful, as the green played in front of her eyes, and because it was so endlessly green, it sounded like sheep.

However, the future does not allow for time to fade, it is always happening, even though it does not happen until it happens, because it is still elsewhere and it takes time for it to move around, to appear and to face Mo's present. In this particular case, the future was delayed in Ut's footsteps, which were barely pushing the height of the hill below her, and did not show any sign of the alarm that spilled over in the snap of each branch under Ut's feet. A twig would snap, Ut would pass it by, and a stem would grow behind it. Ut would not turn around because she knew her mind could see far behind, and that ability was worrying, especially now that she had to keep going ahead so as to urgently see Mo. Besides, her legs were very weak, and despite the walking stick, they behaved as if they did not have a past and took each new step like a baby's first one. *Now*, Ut thought, and *now*, Ut stood, *now*, Ut walked, trying to avoid the twigs that, aside from springing up like the past, could trip her at any *now*. She knew Mo was expecting her, but not only her, Mo was waiting for them, and she was probably listening to the sounds of the woods, which always gives steps away in the snapping of twigs and flying of birds to the sky screaming, when many twigs break.

One twig is no twig, and Mo won't hear it,

Ut thought, concentrating on her feet, so she wouldn't look back in her mind,
One person is no person,

she continued to think things that are obvious and repeat them to herself, because obvious things support the body even better than the walking stick does, some can even help it climb up,

Only God by himself is God,

Ut climbed another steep slope, but was too tired and stopped to rest, and that was by no means obvious, because if one took a deeper look, it would seem that even God was not alone in himself, why would he create us anyway? Ut's mind wondered, but Ut could not continue this thought, even though she knew the answer, because she had reached the last hill before Mo's hill, and felt totally impotent. Come on, give me some more strength, she asked someone or maybe herself, I have to tell Mo immediately, to ask her, to push myself off the ground with the walking stick. She stopped thinking obvious things, their strength was evidently exhausted, and there was a need for some not-so-obvious power, instead she began to speak in her mind what she would say to Mo when she appeared unexpectedly in front of her door all by herself and Mo asks her, how did you manage to come here alone?, why are you alone?, where is the stretcher which you climb the steep slope with?, and Ut began pacing along with the words she found within himself,

There is no stretcher, Mo, the people did not want to come with me, they are exhausted,

How can this be, Ut, it is your body that is exhausted, not theirs,

That's how it is, Mo ...

Ut followed the rhythm of her own speech with the walking stick, and the snapping of twigs, and her thoughts thrust from the heights they had reached, they even did a jump which her body could not follow, and the little bundle, hanging on her neck so that her hands remained free, swung briskly from one side, then to the other, and almost ended up dragging her with it, but Ut stopped it and put it back in her bosom, then explained, so that she didn't lose her rhythm:

The body, Mo, is the sacrifice of salvation,

How come, Ut ?

Like this, Mo, the body is offered,

How come?

if you're stupid you will not understand, but what we do not understand, we go through, Mo, and I ask you to give yours, because mine is so old that it cannot be sacrificed, as it is by pure accident that it's still alive,

How, Ut?

Ut stopped. The forest in front of her eyes had become lighter, and now the end of the path and a beam of sunlight were visible. Ut stopped and could not go any further, because it was one thing to think thoughts in your mind and to use their power, but to speak out loud was a whole other matter, and, as the necessity of uttering these words was nearing, she decided to try it,

“The body is a victim of corruption,” said Ut, to hear how the distance from inside to outside changed her mind, and she did not like the fact that the justification did not give her any strength. She turned back and wondered if she was better off going back, but her weakness turned her off, and she turned back to the sunlight, where the woods ended, where, she thought, Mo’s meadow is waiting for me, where peace is waiting for me and from whence I may not return at all ... Ut imagined how she would stay with Mo, how Mo would care for her, how she wouldn’t have to count people, how she would stop counting the days, and that thought made her feel both good and impossible.

Maybe I’ll tell her nothing and leave everything as it is,

And she took off again, even picking up the rhythm of her walking stick, and so the stick shepherded Ut, as it would a flock of sheep, if they existed. The path lighted up more and more with every step and every touch of the walking stick,

... until the light engulfed Ut’s eyes, and she lifted her hand to her forehead to keep it from blinding her.

... the light did not blind her, but something else happened, and Ut started staring, continued staring, closed her eyes, opened her eyes, stared again and continued to look, for the view stood steadily along with what was viewed, but not so steadily that one could miss the movement which made it even more real. Ut, however, would not dare move, and did not dare move, until the perplexity became unbearable and she spoke so loudly that her voice slid across the grass and reached Mo,

“Mo!” shouted Ut. “I’m having a vision,” she said because she had had visions before, she knew very well what it was like and how the visions responded to an outside voice. Mo had stood up, she was looking back too, her head raised as a greeting or because of the sun,

“Ut!” Mo cried, and the grass’s good intentions carried her voice. “What vision?”

“I see a child,” said Ut,

“It’s not a vision, Ut,” Mo said in a louder voice, and to confirm what she had said, she grabbed the child’s hand and raised it, so that the child could unwillingly greet her.

Ut took a moment to look again, until Mo’s words turned the vision into reality, then she stepped forward without even leaning on the walking stick, crossed the meadow, and stopped only a step away from Mo and the child.

“There are no more children, Mo, how did you find this one?”

“I don’t know, I found it,” Mo answered.

“Where did you find it?”

“It found me right here, where we’re standing.”

“So it’s really...”

“Yes, really...”

Ut examined the child.

“It’s very weak, it will die,” she said.

“It will not die, it doesn’t stop breathing when it’s asleep,” said Mo.

The child was hiding behind Mo’s skirt and looked frightened of Ut’s skin, which was wrinkling at every lip movement because of her old age.

“The child is scared,” said Mo, and Ut leaned toward him and put her hand on his head,

“Do not be frightened,” she said, but he did not listen to her and began trembling as if he was cold. Ut, who had lived in different times and had experience with children, did not let her soul waver, she knew that children always expressed more than what was, and so she did not mind the trembling, but fell on her knees, for the sake of comfort, and began to feel the child’s shoulders, his chest, his legs.

“It’s a boy,” she announced.

“A boy,” agreed Mo.

“Did you feed him?”

“I fed him.”

Ut reached for the child’s eyes, opened his eyelids wide with two fingers to peer at the pupils and eyeballs, she wanted to look through them and see what’s inside and understand better if it was good or bad, but the eyes were black and impermeable, they turned up to the sky, and a beam of light reached them, but Ut’s gaze did not, the child remained impenetrable, still clinging to Mo’s skirt, without much resistance.

“We haven’t seen anything like this for many years, but apparently it is possible and it is a confirmation,” said Ut after concluding her examination, the purpose of which remained unclear, she then struggled to stand up on her feet, but did not explain what the child confirmed, while Mo was excited and did not understand the words well enough to ask. So Mo and Ut both went silent and stayed silent for a long time, and so did the child, because he preferred not to

speak or could not speak at all. Mo waited to hear what Ut had to say, and what her judgement would be, she did not even think to ask why the others were not there. Ut waited for her thought to grow by itself, so that it would be true. When their bodies tired of standing in wait, Ut finally said,

“Mo, let’s sit somewhere and talk, I cannot stand anymore.”

“What about the aster flowers, Ut? Did you bring the Book?” asked Mo, glancing at the small bag hung around Ut’s neck, that could not possibly hold the Book.

“I did not bring it, Mo. It is very heavy. I barely brought myself. I brought something else, and as for the aster flowers, I’ll pick them later and put them in the Book when I get back. The year will not go by in vain.”

Mo took the child by the hand, and both of them went inside the gate, Ut followed them along the path in the garden, and they all entered the house. Mo put the child on the couch and told him to stay there and play with his ball, then she and Ut sat on the bench next to the stove that had long gone cold. Mo waited for Ut to begin speaking, but Ut could not bring herself to and time began to run empty without the tissue of words and movement, only the child’s eyes were moving within it, the child, clutching his ball, but this game was no longer enough, so his eyes darted around the shelves filled with other useless things, until his gaze fell on the broken clock, then on the black book, then on the board with the faded flower, then to the board on which the Image was barely visible. After examining everything, the child pulled up his legs on the couch, put his head on the pillow, and closed his eyes. Only then did Ut open her mouth, but these two events were probably not related.

“Mo,” uttered Ut, then stopped, the name resounded but did not leave, instead it remained there waiting, and, as she could not leave it hanging in the air, Ut made one more effort. “Mo,” she said again. “We want something. We, the village, there is something we want.”

Mo continued waiting patiently, but her silence became more careful, so she could better understand what she would have to do.

“You’re the youngest,” said Ut, as if continuing a thought that was not clear to Mo, and it fell into her mind in a place of confusion.

“I am the youngest? Is this true?”

“Yes, it is. When you came here, you were not much older than this child... three-four aster flowers, three on top...no one else has come here after you.”

“A lot of time has passed since then.”

“Yes, it has. We are all older, me most of all.”

“Will you tell me about it?”

Ut, however, had no intention of telling Mo about the past, it was hers, and probably didn’t matter much, she had climbed the hill all alone to say something far more important and she finally said it:

“Mo, we have to know if the world is still there or not,” she uttered and stopped immediately to let Mo think this huge thing over, Mo, however, did not start thinking it over, because this thing was too big, instead she clung to what was familiar:

“Ut, the homes have been empty for many years now, no one comes by, the gangs have stopped attacking us, there is no one to take even the useless things, it feels like there is nothing, what more do we need to know?”

“And this child, Mo?” asked Ut, for she had unexpectedly gained an undisputable argument.

Mo’s eyebrows narrowed all the way to her nose as a testimony that she had passed the confusion stage and had started to think, and Ut let her think in silence until her thoughts cleared up and she said to herself in her mind: Ut’s right, there are still people, and they even give birth to children, and we do not know whether... she came to that conclusion alone, but she could not convince herself, as she didn’t trust herself.

“When I was flying around the area, I could only see pathways, no people,” she uttered her last objection, wanting Ut to convince her, but Ut was not convinced herself.

“I don’t know, Mo, you are the one who flies, but the villagers are restless and want to know for sure. I ask them: what troubles you, but they keep silent. And even if they tell me, then what? I am not a priest to cleanse their souls. They have started thinking bad things since that image and the voice appeared, and as they are thinking, so they will start doing. There will be trouble. I knew I should have broken the generator... but I was overwhelmed, mercy sometimes is not merciful.” The last part Ut told only herself and sighed because she felt guilty.

“There was no image, only static,” Mo said to comfort her, but Ut shrugged and remained unconsolated, her guilt bit her even more viciously and she finally uttered what she had come here to say:

“Mo, evil is piling up... come on, go check, your legs are still healthy, your heart beats evenly, you can walk for days and come back a few days later. Go see if there still is a world out there... and if there is, find a priest and bring him back with you,” repeated Ut, as if this were her most important thought,

then paused to hear Mo's response and see whether she would have to keep convincing her.

Mo stared at the floor for a bit, and then said:

"I can't do this, Ut, I have a child now, I have to take care of it, I can't go too far away."

"It's not yours, Mo, it did not come from your bowel," said Ut immediately and strictly, for she had not anticipated such an answer,

"It does not matter, I found him, he found me, he is mine."

Ut understood her reasoning, realized her argument was valid, and tried to find a solution. She gazed at the child on the couch, sleeping quietly, not causing any trouble, except the trouble that it existed, along with the ambiguity of whether that was a good or bad thing, but it was not the time to answer that riddle, and Ut could not solve it, it was rising up from the horizon independent of Ut's decisions, and that made her sad and at the same time calmed her down. She was engulfed once again by her longing for peace, Ut will no longer count people, Ut will no longer arrange them, Ut will forget the days, Ut will stay in Mo's peace, she will ascend to the hill from the valley...

"I'll take care of the child, Mo, until you come back," she decided.

"Here?"

"Yes, here. There is evil in the village. The world cannot contain us anymore, for it has become so small."

"And when will I come back?" asked Mo.

"You'll walk for a day, then fly for a day...seven days and seven nights there and seven days and seven nights back..." her voice soared with hope.

"I cannot fly anymore, Ut," Mo interrupted her.

Ut paused and looked worried. She had not seen Mo fly, but Mo had told her she could fly, Ut did not know what she meant, but now, in the desire to convince her, she saw her really soaring over the fields, and maybe over the cities, but Mo crushed her hope, and Ut asked her:

"Why, Mo?"

"Something heavy inside me, Ut, three times now I've set out to tell you *right away*, but I cannot tell you *right away*."

"Don't tell me, Mo, if it is so, go with your feet as one does, go see, and if you see, bring back a priest."

"How will I recognize him? I have only heard about these people from you."

"He will be wearing a black robe and a beard."

"There may not be black robes anymore, look, here we wear what we find,

you said yourself that something happened and everything is different, maybe there are no more black robes."

"You'll know him ... you'll want to tell him *right away*."

"And when will I be back?"

"Very soon, just walk seven days and then back seven. If you can't see what's going on in that many days, you never will. You will be back here in the beginning of autumn, and the child will have grown very little, I will feed it."

"And what if you don't wake up one morning?"

"If I have to, I won't nap, won't even sleep, so that I'm awake all the time."

Mo thought it over one last time, when it is asked of you, you have to do it, she said to herself, and gazed sadly at the child, it was sleeping, wanting for nothing in that very moment, she imagined the woods and meadows she used to fly over, but she was now required to go farther, farther, without knowing clearly where she was going.

"Ut, the world is very big," said Mo.

"It is very big," sighed Ut.

"I have heard that there are seas."

"There are seas, there is a great and vast sea," Ut sighed again, doubting whether she should send Mo at all and whether the both of them wouldn't be better off quieting down on the green grass, waiting for winter to come.

"I'll go, Ut," Mo said finally, perhaps drawn by this great and spacious sea, though there was hardly any chance of getting to it.

Ut paused and did not rejoice, she even got a bit sad. She imagined Mo, wandering the roads, with nowhere to lie down, and wondered whether she had the right to sacrifice anyone else's body but her own, even if it was for the sake of salvation, which looked so beautiful when she imagined it, but when she said it out loud turned into a sacrifice and urged one to go back, but she said nothing, because she thought it was difficult for Mo to grasp such things, and even if she did it would not help her. At the same time, Mo was also imagining, her images were too vague, but exciting, because she had never left the area except when she was flying, and had not seen more water than the lake in which a boat smiles like a mute mouth. She tried to understand one last time, but the question did not come out clearly:

"Ut, if the world has ended, that means that it had become useless, doesn't it?"

Ut shrugged, Mo was not smart, and sometimes she thought of inappropriate things. She kept silent, and Mo returned to her images without an answer, something was bothering her. Suddenly she remembered:

“Ut, we were so worried, we forgot to pick the aster flowers.”

Ut jumped up and felt the bundle still hanging around her neck with her fingers.

“We forgot, Mo, let’s do it tomorrow at dawn before you leave, I will put them in the little book, it is not as heavy as the big one, and I will give it to you, to keep you safe as you leave, and as you’re coming back. So, that way, you will carry time with you, while us over here, we will wait for you with no time, and when you return we will put them in the big Book.”

“Very well,” said Mo, “that way the child won’t grow up before I get back.”

That calmed her down quite a bit and she stopped thinking about useful and not so useful things anymore.

They stood there for as long as it took the child on the couch to start moving about, stretch, and open his eyes.

Then they both got up from the bench and began ending this day and helping out the next one, the one when Mo would go on her journey.

Ut and Mo had a lot to do that day:

to bake bread, so that they could fill Mo’s backpack with what is most essential, what her body could not function without,

to move the potato and cabbage crates from the warehouse to the house because they were heavy and Ut could not manage this by herself,

to move the wood under the shed the same exact reason,

to draw enough water from the well for many days ahead and pour it into the barrel for the same exact reason,

But the most important thing for Mo was to explain to the child that when the sun rose the next day, she would not be there, but she would return before he grows up, and during that time Ut would take care of him, cook, wash his shirt, sew him another shirt, and would care for him so much that she wouldn’t even sleep. The child listened to Mo, and though he did not speak, he probably understood. His eyes grew even darker and she imagined seeing a tear in them.

“Do not weep,” Mo said, “when I come back we’ll be together forever. And as I walk, I will think of you and I will find your name.”

The child calmed down and began following her around while she was doing things. Ut also did some things, but not as many, she mostly advised Mo, on how much bread to eat a day so that it would be enough; what kind of food she could find in the woods and in the grass; how to cut sweet roots with a knife and carve their core; how she must not ever forget her knife; how to protect her shoes, because when a person is only walking on foot, they are very important; how she should find

a hole for her body before it gets dark and put the sheepskin coat inside, that Mo must necessarily take it her backpack, so that it could protect her from any sudden cold, serve her as bedding, and also to remember the sheep by, and remember Ut by it while she was at it, because she had made it for her, and to keep doing all this until she meets people, because when she meets them, they will accommodate her and tell her what she needs to know, unless they are wicked.

“Beware of the wicked, Mo, they may lie to you, and instead of truth, you may bring their lies here.”

Ut went on like this, and Mo sometimes listened, sometimes she didn’t, she didn’t understand how a person could be wicked, or how to tell, but time was flying along with the sun, leaving no space for understanding. For now, she knew what Ut wanted her to do, and it was so much and so big that she was downplaying everything she could meet on the road.

And so, the day rolled into night, and when the sun went down, all three of them sat by the stove, which was full of bread baking, and watched the fire swallow twigs. Mo asked Ut where she should walk to, Ut told her to cross the hill where the sun set and keep going in the direction of the sunset, because the sun knows its own path quite accurately, so she will be sure she is going straight. Then Ut and Mo fell silent because everything that needed to be said was already said, and as the sight of the fire tired them out, the child lay down on the couch, Mo lay down beside it, and Ut climbed the ladder up to the top to lie down in Mo’s bed.

Slumber swallowed them all, and Mo, Ut and the child began dreaming, each their own dream.

At dawn, Ut put her hand on Mo’s forehead.

Mo woke up.

Mo put her hand on the child’s forehead, it did not wake up.

Mo put her clothes on, and then put on her sturdy shoes in case of rain and mud.

Mo put the coat in her backpack, which Ut had made from sheepskins at a time when the meadows were pastures full of sheep.

Mo put five loaves of bread in her backpack and left two on the stove for Ut and the child to have for the time being.

Mo put a flask in her backpack to fill up with water when she encountered a stream or a spring, so that she wouldn’t ever be thirsty.

Mo put a knife in her backpack pocket to cut the sweet roots with and carve out their core. In the same pocket, she put matches, so that she could light a fire if it got cold or just for some light.

Mo put the gift box on top, where she could collect what the woods have given birth to and what the field has produced, when she reached it. The box still contained seven grapes, and she wanted to share them with Ut and the child, but Ut refused, as they would be more useful to Mo, and they could not divide them because of their odd number.

Ut and Mo went out into the yard and then to the eastern side of the wall, where three aster flowers bloomed among the ruins.

Ut pulled the little book out of the bundle around her neck and read something.

Mo did not understand whatever Ut was reading.

The sky sparked some light.

Ut plucked the flowers, put them inside the book between three different pages because the book was small and the flowers were big.

Ut put the book back into the bundle and hung it around Mo's neck.

It turned out that time was not so heavy at all.

Ut and Mo went together to the gate and opened it.

The green shined from the morning dew.

Ut gave Mo her walking stick to support her, to keep her safe from evil animals, and to help her reach tall branches.

The sky sparked even more light.

Mo crossed the threshold and walked ahead.

Mo did not look back.

The ground sloped down.



Zdravka *EVTIMOVA*

was born in 1959 in Pernik, Bulgaria. She is a fiction writer and a literary translator from English, German and French. She holds a BA in English and an MA in American literature from the University of Veliko Turnovo, Bulgaria.

The author of dozens of novels and short stories, Zdravka Evtimova has won numerous prizes for her work, including the Razvitie Literary Award for best Bulgarian contemporary novel in 2000 for *Your Shadow Was My Home*; the Best Novel Award of the Union of Bulgarian Writers in 2003 for her novel *Thursday*; the Anna Kamenova National Short Story Award in 2005; the Cosmos National Short Story Award in 2004; the Zlaten Lanez National Short Story Award – in 2005 and 2010; the Blaga Dimitrova National Fiction Prize, 2015; the Novel of the Year Award from the 13 Centuries of Bulgaria Fund for her novel *The Same River*.

Zdravka Evtimova's fiction has enjoyed impressive success abroad. Her short stories have been published in 31 countries in the world, including the US, China, the UK, France, Germany, Switzerland, Japan, Canada, Vietnam, Argentina, Spain, Italy, Norway, Denmark Austria, Slovenia, Serbia, Romania, Greece, and elsewhere. Her short story "It Is Your Turn" was one of the ten award-winning stories, which after a world-wide competition was included in the anthology "Dix auteurs du monde entire" (Ten Authors from Around the World), published in Nantes, France, in 2005. Her short stories have been nominated twice for the prestigious Pushcart Prize in the US, in 2006 and 2012. She also won second place in the international competition in

Sinbad, Italy, 2015, for her novel *Sinfonia*, published by Salento Books. She won the Balkanika International Fiction Prize 2015 for her short story collection *Pernik Stories*, which was named the best fiction work published in Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Turkey in 2014. Zdravka Evtimova's short story "Vassil" was one of the 10 award-winning stories in the BBC world-wide short story competition 2005. It was broadcast by Radio BBC UK in February 2006. Her short story "Blood of a Mole" has been included in high-school textbooks in Denmark, and as of January 1, 2019, this short story is included in the Anthony of Recommended Reading for High Schools in the USA.



THE GREEN EYES OF THE WIND

A novel

Synopsis

The Green Eyes of the Wind is a novel depicting contemporary Bulgaria, in which ordinary people struggle to make a living, escape from humiliation and climb up the social hierarchy. This is a difficult task. The novel is focused on the hardships and humiliations the three protagonists – a grandmother, her daughter and granddaughter – encounter every day and their attempts to preserve their dignity in a world of fraud; the embarrassment and mortification they have to put up with, the constant lack of money and the uncertainty as to what *tomorrow* will have in store for them.

The grandmother has run away from her family and from Radomir, a small Bulgarian town. In Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, she marries a rich man, one of the cruel criminals who has accumulated wealth through coercion and bribery. The grandmother is a wily and tough woman who knows how to ruin her criminal husband.

Her daughter also abandons Radomir, her husband and child for another man who turns out to be rude and mean. The run-away daughter finds her mother in Sofia and asks her for help. Unfortunately, no help is offered to her.

The granddaughter Anna, a five-year-old girl, has remained with her father in Radomir, where she has only one friend, a five-year-old boy called Shushomir. The grandmother, her daughter and her granddaughter have one thing in common: they can sense the approaching footsteps of death. Each one of them knows that the smell of toasted almonds is a sign that death is stalking a man, and soon that man will die.

The daughter is hired as a babysitter by a rich woman married to an old influential politician whom she doesn't care about. The daughter's task is to take care of the rich woman's son. The rich woman is sexually attracted to the babysitter.

The final chapter of the novel reveals how the two children Shushomir and little Anna are separated. The girl will be taken to stay with the rich woman, and Shushomir is left crying by the dirt road, his eyes following the car which disappears in the distance.

Anna can sense the smell of toasted almonds flying towards her only friend Shushomir.

THE GREEN EYES OF THE WIND

Excerpt / Translated by Zdravka Evtimova

“It was pleasant to sit in the cool of the evening with their feet on the great stone and... see the herons flying upstream, their color matching the sky so closely they might have been eyes of wind.”

Annie Proulx, *Them Old Cowboy Songs*

I hid in the pantry, yet I still could hear them shouting. My father was yelling at my mother. He used such words that if I started shooting my mouth off like he did, Dad would cut off my ears and hands on the spot. In the convenience store, I'd heard many ugly things, too, and I knew this was the way people spoke. When I asked Dad what those words meant, he slapped me across the face. I slowly got accustomed to keeping mum because I found out that everything men said was filth. If you didn't want to get a smack on the bottom, you hid in the pantry. Its window was small, but you could see the printed letters all right.

I didn't know all the letters, but the pictures in the book left clues for me. “H,” for example, jutted out next to a picture of a horse, and it meant that this letter was a horse. Every time I saw an “H,” I loaded heavy bags on its back. Mother sent me to a vegetable shop at the Fiddle Market because everything was much cheaper there. She had taught me, “Sweep in front of the fat saleswoman's stall,” I swept in front of it and the big auntie gave me two tomatoes more than I had paid for; I brought her water from the mineral spring, and she gave me a cucumber, then I carried the bags as heavy as trucks all the way to our house, thinking about “H,” the horse's letter. The horse lugged the bags for me.

I slowly learned the letter “G,” grass. My dad ordered me, “Go dig the potatoes,” I went to the field, and after a while my hands hurt. I thought about the letter made of green grass and it felt like I got some rest.

I'd learned to be happy when mom and dad quarreled. I hid in the pantry with the alphabet book. Many horses and horses' letters lived in this book, and grass grew there, too, and I was curious what sort of a fairytale the book knew. It was clear that the horses chomped the grass, but I wanted more than that. I felt good when nobody paid me any heed. When there was no more brandy in his bottle, Dad would quickly fall asleep.

One evening, while he was snoring, I learned to change the TV channels. I hated watching how the football players kicked the ball. The ball hurt if you hit it hard because when it was still alive it had skin like you and me. So, I ran away from this channel and watched an old woman blabber on about happiness. She couldn't tell happiness from a haystack if you asked me.

If you wanted to pass unnoticed, you'd best not be pretty. If you were as beautiful as my mom, every guy looked your way, and your plans went awry. If you were ugly like my mom's boyfriend, everybody also looked at you, therefore it was best to occupy the middle ground. You'd better be neither pretty nor ugly, neither tall nor short. The best thing for you was to be an old woman, but I wasn't an old woman, I was a child, neither tall nor short. However, I surely was a pretty child because people called me “Cutie!” I hated it, and for this reason I went to Arisana, the barber, I swept her barbershop, brought her a bottle of water from the mineral spring, and told her very quietly, “Arisana, thank you, please, shave my head.”

“Why should I do that?” she asked.

“It's very hot,” I lied to her. “Lice eggs hatch quickly in your hair in the summer. Lice bite like tigers.”

Arisana shaved my hair to the bone, and I became neither short nor tall, neither pretty nor plain. I put on my black T-shirt I'd bought for 50 cents, I swept Fedo's Second Hand Shirt Shop and brought Fedo water to drink. His wife is ill and very fat, so I folded the second-hand clothes for her. They all smelled of an old chest of drawers. Fedo's wife said Europe smelled exactly like that, so I had to regularly air the room. The dear old lump of lard! She gave me a black T-shirt and black shorts for free. The shorts were too tight, and the T-shirt was wide like the wind around my ribs. Fedo's wife gave me a pair of sandals, very much worn, huge, nearly endless. No one cared to look at me when I padded silently back home, shuffled my feet or rushed past a guy.

I was a free child. The street was heaven for me. If I sat down somewhere to get some rest, folks tossed small change at me, the money landed by my old sandals, and I got rich quick. The minute I came back home, I immediately got dolled up. Dad was keen on making it perfectly clear his daughter wasn't a beggar.

One day, mom said, “Good bye, Anna,” then she hugged me and even kissed me.

“Why are you kissing me?” I asked, scared. “Are you going to die?”

“Yes, I'll die,” she said and laughed.

“When somebody dies on TV, he doesn't laugh. He cries,” I corrected her.

"I will die," were mom's final words. "Look at these..." she produced a bar of chocolate as big as the field, a new dress, almost brand new from Fedo's second-hand store, new second-hand sandals and a two-lev bill. "Good bye, my girl."

The TV said that dead folks went to the sky, but apart from the moon and a couple of thin stars, I hadn't noticed any man up there. It was only natural: the sky was far from our house, and until the airplane took mom there, it had to slog its way up to the clouds for a week. If she and Kosso, her boyfriend, had already spent the money on booze, they couldn't buy any tickets and they'd have to go to heaven on foot. Mom would get tired, Kosso would get drunk, she'd be hit by a kidney crisis, and they'd fall behind schedule.

"How will I know you've reached heaven?" I asked her before she'd turned her back on me, and she said, "Every time it starts to rain, you take a bucket and collect the rain water. I want you to know that I send the rain home to you. Wash your face with the water from the bucket and you won't be sad anymore."

"Good bye, mom," I said. "Don't lug Kosso when he's drunk. He's very heavy. You'll have kidney problems, and I'll feel sorry for you. You and your rain will be in pain."

Mom put her suitcase on the ground and kissed me one more time, tears big as pinheads springing out of her eyes.

"Don't be afraid, one's not in pain when one dies," I lied to her.

Mom wasn't a chicken-hearted woman. She took her suitcase, gave me a two-lev bill, and started for heaven. She got into Kosso's jalopy, a rusty Opel Cadet, and I've never seen her since.

After mom, my father's girlfriend took her place in our house. The girlfriend was a huge and very healthy woman. Her name was Darina. Neither dad nor she said anything. They lay down on the floor and did exactly what the TV taught them to do. The TV taught them how to love each other.

Nobody bothered me, and this was the reason I didn't mind love, on the contrary, I was grateful to it every time I grabbed my ABC book and struggled to read. Reading was hard because I couldn't grasp how I was to string pictures together and turn them into words. Darina kept constantly mum, so I couldn't ask her a question. I knew a way, though. I swept the kitchen floor, removed love from the floor, and brought Darina a bottle of mineral water. She drank from it. Our neighbor's donkey drank like her, guzzling and slurping until the beast saw the bottom of the bucket. Darina swilled mineral water, gargled with it and didn't stop gulping until she saw the bottom of her bottle.

"What letter is it?" I asked as I showed her a book, in which a truck was painted.

"T," she said.

I brought her more water. She drank like our neighbor's donkey, I showed her another picture, and she rumbled, "P." I ran around like a chicken with its head cut off, mumbling "T, T, T" and "P, P, P." Our neighbor's boy, Shushomir, peeked over the wall that separated our backyards and asked, "Are you going nuts or are you hungry?"

I was scared I might forget the letters I'd learned, so I kept on repeating them in my mind "T...T...T" and "P...P...P," looking at the truck and the pig in my ABC book. Shushomir flew the coop, but after a while I saw him again. He'd climbed onto the wall, and he must have put a lot of effort into this for the wall was as high as the top of the cherry tree.

My dad and Shushomir's dad had fought over mom, over a boar, a lamb, over a haystack, a glass of brandy, and they couldn't stand each other. If they met by chance, they brawled or fought or punched each other in the face. My dad was huge. He was even taller than big Darina, and Shushomir's father was burlier than them both. Shushomir's mom, on the other hand, was undersized and her eyes were blue like homemade flea spray, so I wasn't afraid of her. She watched me carefully, but she had not tried to beat me up so far.

There was a way; if you didn't want to get beaten up, you either hid in the pantry or swept the path to the man's front door and brought him a bottle of mineral water directly from the source. I swept the area in front of Shushomir's house and left a bottle of mineral water at the threshold of their house. Shushomir kicked it, but his mom spanked his bottom. Since that day, the woman hadn't dropped any nasty hint about me, on the contrary, one day, like on a weepy TV show, she gave me a bag of food. Unfortunately, dad slapped me across the face and as I fell on the ground, a dog snatched the bag from under my nose.

Now Shushomir sat on the wall, which was six feet high. He could easily climb walls for he was as thin as a worm, but I was a thinner worm than him, and I could climb to the top of anything you could name. What's more, I could distinguish between sorrel, dock leaves and sheep's sorrel; I had noticed Shushomir's cat grazing on yellow grass when she was sick. So, when I was feeling very sad, I grazed on the same grass. On certain days, I suspected I had turned into a cat, I rushed to big Darina's mirror – she didn't let me touch her things, but I believed she didn't scream at me because she was mute; however, it turned out I hallooed before I was out of the woods.

“Kid!” she roared. “Don’t touch that!”

The truth was she didn’t roar. Her voice sounded like our neighbor’s donkey braying in the backyard, so if I wanted to use something she had, I had to first sweep the kitchen floor and bring her a jug of water. She drank two hours and a half and finally said, “Take what you want.”

I snatched her mirror and looked at myself in it. All right, I wasn’t a cat, I was a girl, my head shaved to the bone, a black T-shirt wide as a parachute, touching my ankles, and black shorts. It was a wonder I could squeeze into those damned shorts. The mayor’s wife’s baby could comfortably wear them. I figured I wouldn’t bring my pigs to the wrong market if I swept Fedo’s second-hand shop floor one more time. Fedo’s fat wife was so kind you’d imagine she lived in a TV series, and I hoped she’d give me bigger pants.

“Hey! Catch!” shouted Shushomir from the top of the wall. He threw a bag to me; it smelled so good that my nose felt like tearing itself loose from my face and flying to the bag. I even thought it had, but I was wrong. Not my nose, it was my stomach that had run away from me. Now, I had no belly and no guts, and a hole was probably gaping in my midriff. I was scared stiff.

“Catch!” Shushomir shouted again as he threw a pair of pants to me. They were blue, with zippers, like the jeans they showed on TV. For a moment, I forgot I had no stomach and I stared at the pocket as if I’d never seen one in my life. I was sure our TV knew nothing about happiness. It had never said a word about how enormously delighted you were with a pair of pants. You were ready to extract your heart out of your chest and put it in the smallest pocket, and your heart, which normally didn’t trust anything, would see for itself how gorgeous the piece of clothing Shushomir had tossed to me was. My heart was an unfortunate prisoner amidst my ribs and it couldn’t see a thing unless I took it out in the daylight.

Suddenly, my neck caught fire and I said to myself, “It snapped in two. This is the end.”

My dad kicked the bag which smelled good. I thought my neck would fall apart. It would have been better if it had because after the third whack I collapsed in a heap on the ground. It served me right for being so dumb. I should have dropped down onto the grass after the first blow.

“I’ll kill you!” Shushomir yelled at dad.

“No, I’ll kill you,” my dad yelled back.

“Big and daft as a brush!” Shushomir had vanished from the top of the wall and was shouting from their backyard.

I was on the other side of the barricade, and I knew one way out: I grabbed the broom and started sweeping the ground in front of dad’s feet. Then I brought him water to drink. He didn’t spank me, but the bottle of water didn’t do the trick.

“Give me a knife!” he roared. He was hollering, but I didn’t believe he’d chop my head off. He couldn’t kill a chicken, and mom called our neighbor to do it. Now, tough Darina cut poultry necks. She was bigger than our house, and the knife looked like a needle in her hand.

My father slashed Shushomir’s gorgeous pants with the knife. I could only count to six, but he cut the pants into more than six pieces. He thrust the torn pieces into the bag which smelled good, shoved a stone into it, too, then stone, pieces of cloth, rich smell and bag flew over the wall, landing with a huge thud in Shushomir’s backyard.

“Idiot!” Shushomir’s mom shouted.

My dad didn’t shout back anything. He didn’t have a soft spot for loose talk. He and Darina started their long love on the grass instead, but I knew everything there was to know about love and wasn’t interested.

I kept on asking myself why that bag smelled so good. What was in it? As my mind asked questions, I cried for the gorgeous pants which had shown me what happiness was. Now I had no stomach and I couldn’t say what happiness was. However, there was a hope my belly had come back for I was very hungry.

I ran to the field and started grazing on the thick dark-green grass Shushomir’s cat grazed when he was sick. Now, it was a sure thing I’d become a cat. I touched the back of my neck where dad had slapped me, and it seemed cat hair had already grown there.



Georgi GOSPODINOV

(1968) is one of the most translated Bulgarian writers with books published in more than 25 languages and widely reviewed by media such as *The New Yorker*, *The NY Times*, *The Guardian*, etc.

His recent novel, *The Physics of Sorrow* (2015, Open Letter Books, US), won the international Jan Michalski Prize 2016 and was a finalist for the PEN America Translation Prize, Premio Strega Europeo and other prestigious international awards. The novel is published in 15 languages, including English, Spanish, German, Italian, among others.

Blind Vaysha, a short animation (dir. Theo Ushev) based on Gospodinov's short story (from his book *And Other Stories*), made it to the Oscar Nominees in 2017.

Gospodinov is the author of 15 books of poetry, fiction and non-fiction, two plays, a graphic novel, an opera libretto (*Space Opera*, 2015, Poznan), scripts for short feature films (one of them with an Honorable Mention at the Sundance Festival), some socially critical video projects as *The Slap Factory* and *Future Cancelled*. In 2017/18, Gospodinov was awarded a Cullman Fellowship by the New York Public Library.

His recent book, *All Our Bodies* (flash fiction, Janet 45, 2018) is among the bestselling books in Bulgaria.

ALL OUR BODIES

Synopsis

The book *All Our Bodies* includes 103 ultra-short stories. The shortest of them is only three words long, the longest is two pages. They were finished in January 2018 in New York, where the author lived after winning one of the most prestigious writers' residencies in the world, that of the New York Public Library...

Gospodinov's ultra-short stories are at the same time funny and absurd, melancholy and ironic – a style we immediately recognize from *Natural Novel*, *Physics of Sorrow*, *Blind Vaysha*, and his first book, *Lapidarium*.

Here, where concentration is most crucial, things have been rendered exceptionally masterfully: "Selected Autobiographies," "Roll Call for the Night Watch," "The Three Times When H.H. Was Happy," "The Copy Editor's Fear of Mistake," "Rooster in the Emergency Room," "Ginko Biloba in New York," "The Angel of Unread Books"... those are just a few of the titles in the book that already carry their stories within themselves.

Poet Ivan Teofilov, about *All Our Bodies*

At a time of battles over the novel, Gospodinov once again surprises with an abrupt change of genre, challenging both readers and writers in new directions. The book's afterword is a defense of brevity in garrulous times.

"Today, when there is so much being said and most of it at random, as in the pub, a good short story gives us the sense of the true measure of every word. And of every minute. Or so I'd like to think." (Georgi Gospodinov)

One more description of the short story according to Gospodinov:

"As children we would have contests to see who could hold their breath underwater for longest. You stick your head under – in the absence of a sea, in a stainless steel wash tub – the roaring in your ears, the claustrophobia in your ribcage, you don't breathe for half a minute, a minute, sometimes even a minute and a half, more or less as long as a short story lasts, and then you quickly pull your head up, you come back to life. That first breath is sharp and awakening. Short stories should be something like that, too. You won't drown, but after every submersion you breathe as if for the first time."

Book design by Lyuba Haleva.

From ALL OUR BODIES

Translated by Angela Rodel

The Three Times When H.H. Was Happy

H.H. lived 90 years, more or less in peace and quiet, without any particular upheavals. During all those years he was happy exactly three times. For two of them, he never knew it.



To the Door

In time you come to understand that the only thing you can do is console. Before my grandma died, she was already wasted away, she would grasp my hand and say, funny thing is, I still want to live, tomorrow I'll milk the goat, I could use some fresh milk. The goat had died 20 years earlier, and grandma hadn't gotten up out of bed for six months...

When I was little and afraid to fall asleep in the dark, I stretched my hand out from my bed, she stretched her hand out from hers, the room was that narrow, and this bridge drove away my fears. It was like she was seeing me off, holding my hand, until we passed the scary thing, then she'd let me go on alone into sleep.

Now what could I do but return the favor to her? Everyone enters into sleep and death alone, but it is good to have someone see you off to the door.

Mistake

She is five. She has lined up all of her stuffed animals on the floor and asks them: "How are you today, kids?"

Then she goes behind them and answers in their voice: "Better than tomorrow."

Has she gotten mixed up? I wonder from the other room. We usually say "better than yesterday." "Better than tomorrow" implies a heightened level of anxiety, if I can put it like that. Could a mistake actually be a sign?

Milk

There is a cowshed in the courtyard of the monastery. In the evening, as the cows come home, a radio plays in the shed. If the weather is bad and they don't go out to pasture, the radio is on all day. Mostly local and classical music. People believe this has a positive effect on the cows, which – translated into plain speaking – means the milk yield increases. At the top of every hour, the radio broadcasts the news. The cows fall silent and ruminate, alongside their hay, on the latest events of the day. I buy milk from there almost every day, fresh, still warm and thick. I haven't been there for a few days. There has been terrible news on the radio.

Newsflash

One day the poet U.U. hears a newsflash on the radio about the death of a famous Bulgarian poet... And right then the signal cuts out or perhaps there is a power outage, but in any case he can't figure out who exactly has passed away. He only hears that the funeral will be today at two.

It's now quarter to two.

Well, if it's some poet-friend of his – and this has been happening a lot recently – of course he'll have to go. But who, who for God's sake, has kicked the bucket?... In his head he goes over everyone who has one foot in the grave (he, too, should be on this list, but, for some reason, he leaves himself out). He thinks about calling a few of his closest writer-friends, just to check up on them, but then decides that it would be awkward – what would he say when the wife or the suspect himself picks up the phone? So he decides to call in to the radio. Excuse me, I didn't hear the end of your midday news, who exactly was the poet who passed away? Just a moment, the woman at the other end of the line says, and a few seconds later chirps: The famous Bulgarian poet U.U. has died.

But that's me, U.U. drops the phone and rushes off like a person who hates to be late.

The Angel of Unread Books

They're out there somewhere, I can see them stacked up on top of one another, all the books I will never read. The top of the tower is lost in the clouds, while on its very summit sits the Angel of Unread Books, his legs dangling down. Some of these books have not even been written. This unread Tower of Babylon grows day after day, ever more striking.

Sometimes I think God can be reached through not knowing.



Rene KARABASH

(real name Irena Ivanova) was born on July 8, 1989, in the town of Lovech, Bulgaria. She is a writer, director and actress.

She is the author of the poetry collection *Hips and Butterflies* and the novel *Ostajnica*, both published by Janet 45 publishing house. *Ostajnica* was nominated for the Janet Peroto National Literary Award. Her nomination for the Ivan Nikolov National Poetry Award makes her one of the youngest poets ever to be nominated in the history of the competition. In 2015 Rene Karabash won the National Literary Award Boyan Penev for fiction. Many of her literary texts have been translated and subsequently published in several international poetry anthologies.

Since 2017 Karabash has been a member of the jury of the Petya Dubarova National Literary Contest. She is the founder of *Rabbit Hole*, a Creative Academy for Writers – the first of its kind in Bulgaria – which brings together some of the most prominent Bulgarian writers, screenwriters and playwrights.

For her part in *Godless*, a film by Ralitzia Petrova, she received several prestigious awards for Best Actress: a Silver Leopard (Locarno), the Heart of Sarajevo (Sarajevo), an Aluminium Horse (Stockholm) and a Golden Rose (Varna).

Rene Karabash also works in the theatre as a director and playwright. She is the director of *Blue Eyes*, *Black Hair*, based on the novel by Marguerite Duras, which is staged at the Vazrazhdane Theatre, as well as an assistant director and dramatist of Oscar

Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Her next project is the adaptation of *Ostajnica* for the stage.

Karabash holds a degree in Applied Linguistics (English and French) from Veliko Turnovo University St. Cyril and St. Methodius, Bulgaria. She was a scholarship student at the Catholic University of the West (*Université catholique de l'Ouest*) in Angers, France. Rene Karabash holds a master's degree in theatre directing from the New Bulgarian University (Sofia, Bulgaria).

OSTAJNICA

A novel

Synopsis

The novel takes readers to the Albanian Alps, to the harsh Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini – a set of laws still governing the isolated patriarchal societies on the Balkans. The book tells the remarkable story of Bekija and her family who fall victims to the laws of the Kanun.

The life of Bekija suddenly begins to unfold through the eyes of a female reporter who has ended up in that godforsaken place to write a feature about the last “ostajnica” on the Balkans.

An “ostajnica” is a sworn virgin who takes a vow of chastity in accordance with the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini. After that she begins to live as a man and thus becomes head of the family. This is a constitutionally recognised sex change made possible by taking a vow; after that, women acquire the same rights as men – rights which had previously been denied to them. Bekija is one of these women who, by force of circumstances, becomes a sworn virgin, takes the male name Matija, earns her freedom but gives up her identity and her love, since love in that place means death. Blood feuds are common in the region and because of Bekija, her family becomes involved in these vendettas. But the reader finds out about that only in the second part of the novel.

Ostajnica is a stream-of-consciousness novel which constantly tosses the reader back and forth in time. The reporter is the portal to the travel into the past – after the death of her father and the escape of her brother, Bekija begins to receive letters which, unfortunately, she cannot read. It is only after the reporter

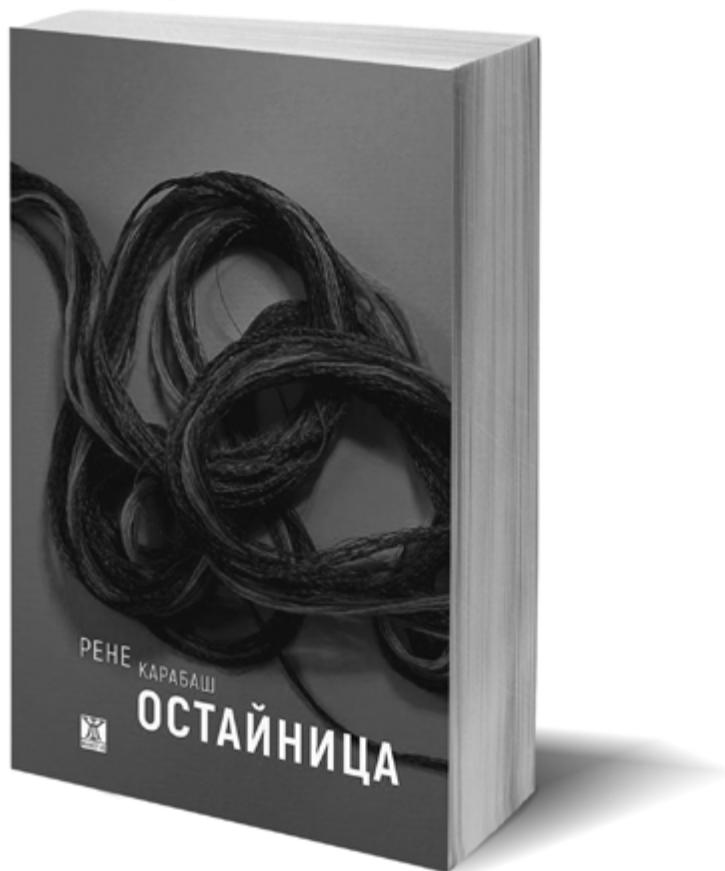
arrives at her home that she reads the letters to her and they reveal the cruel truth which she never even suspected. In that box of letters which Bekija has kept for 15 years are hidden her biggest secrets, the lies of her father, who always wanted to have a son, the truth about her lost love Dhana who has disappeared without trace, the fatal consequences of a meeting that never happened. Also buried in the box is an unread letter from Dhana which never reached her, a sheet of paper which could have spared Bekija the oppressive loneliness and the painful questions throughout all these years.

In the second part of the book the story resumes in the flow of Bekija's thoughts and it transpires that the reporter and the readers have been misled: some of her stories have been made up. Bekija abandons her house and leaves for Bulgaria where her brother lives in the hope that there she will find her first and only love and will start her life from scratch, a life that's different from the one she has devoted to being her father's son. Bekija meets her brother but due to the immeasurable excitement from the reunion and the constant pain in her stomach, she is admitted to hospital. During the surgery she undergoes, the doctors remove from her body the son her father so badly wanted all his life. The phenomenon is known as “fetus in fetu” – an extremely rare condition in which, during the very early stages of a twin pregnancy, one of the twins “eats up” the fetus of his brother or sister and carries that fetus inside their body after birth. When Bekija wakes up in the hospital, Dhana is next to her bed. The happy reunion is followed by their separation, as Dhana has to leave for a writing residency. The only person who brings happiness and meaning to Bekija's life slips through her fingers again. She goes back home devastated. Her only salvation are humility and forgiveness. After going through an emotional crisis, she hears her cow mooing and then puts on her trousers and her boots under her dress. If someone takes a look at her at that moment, they will see half a man, half a woman. Bekija takes a small stool and a rope and leaves the room. The scene may delude the reader into thinking she has decided to take her own life. The moment of truth is interrupted by Dhana who has arrived in the village and is making her way to Bekija's home. When she gets there, she finds Bekija next to the cow who has just delivered a calf: a new life is trembling and steaming right in front of them in the straw. The author's point of view rises from their thoughts like a column of smoke, like an omniscient observer, like the eye of God, which seals that moment of boundless love, of a life complete. In the last chapter the reader finds out that the omniscient narrator is Dhana herself who, being the novel's author, frames the whole story and dedicates it to Bekija, the strongest and bravest woman she has ever met.

•
How far can you go in trying to please your father? Can you become the son he doesn't have? Is it a sin to run away when you're afraid of death? Is it a mistake to give in to passion at the price of someone else's life?

No matter how distanced this story seems to be, geographically and socially, the restraints it depicts are identical to the restraints in every other free country: identical are the murders and the revenge we carry out every single day, identical is also the freedom that we never stop pursuing, identical are the prisons of the self where we end up and the love which we never stop fighting for.

The story of Bekija is a story about the choices we make and the inevitable consequences that follow. This is a book about the constraints we impose on ourselves only to overcome them after that. A story about love and the human being beyond gender, beyond words such as "son" and "daughter," "man" and "woman." A story about the human beings who bring together God's wrath and God's forgiveness within their 21 grams of soul.



OSTAJNICA

Excerpt / Translated by Irina Ivanova

DHANA

*when I was born I realised son meant something good
because mommy once told me my dear girl
you're pretty as the son
and the son was shining then so it must be something good*

Bekija, go fetch the sandpaper, it's in the cabinet above the wash basin, next to the razor, this dovencote won't get built by itself, he would shave at this wash basin every day, then he would swab his face with the towel, he would slowly wipe the razor on it, carefully, both its sides, as if he were sharpening it, then would stick it into a crack in the wooden frame of the window, there isn't much sun in Albania, it's rather foggy, you can see for yourself, that day, for once, there was sun, I went into my father's room, the sandpaper was there, in the cabinet, I took it and looked into the small round mirror over the wash basin, the sun was shining for the first time that year, I saw my father's razor sticking out of the window frame, its slim shadow fell on my face like a moustache, dark and clammy, a moustache that curved downwards, I saw myself into the mirror, I felt the coolness of the razor above my upper lip, my arm rose of its own accord and my rosy fingers, the fingers of a child, touched it, it is hard to say what I felt, it was some kind of force or joy, I can't explain it but I wanted my dad to see me like this

it was like putting on a new piece of clothing which fits you and it's neither too big, nor too small, it just fits you, I stood still, the blue curtains behind my back billowed, a pale moustached boy was staring back at me from the window, he looked like Skanderbeg, the hero, once mommy showed me a picture taken before I was born, she and my father together in front of the monument of the great Albanian hero Skanderbeg in Tirana, the only time they left the village after I was born they went to the wedding of a cousin of my father's and

someone's knocking on the window and my body shudders, I thought it

was my father, at the window instead was the great-granddaughter of Granny Canê from the neighbouring street, the girl lived in Bulgaria and came to the countryside for the summer holiday to visit her grandma, she was my age but much more beautiful and taller, no one played with her because she never said anything, Dhana with the translucent skin is standing at the window and smiling at me, her teeth are white, I can still see them, milk and shame, broad as shoulders, embraced me and moved me a step aside from the wash basin, the moustache clung to the blue curtain behind me, I could still feel it but it was now behind my back, like a presence, like a relative who was making me feel ashamed and I wanted to hide it from her, and she was staring at me with her white teeth, I didn't know what to do, whether to ask her what are you staring at, stupid, or to smile at her, I swallowed hard, my throat was dry, Dhana, come back home right away, Bekija, where are you, come on, quick, the sun will hide soon, I looked at the door, then I moved my eyes to the window but Dhana was no longer there, only her silhouette was still there, in the retina of my eyes, like an icon in the frame of the window, I clutched the sandpaper and left the room, I could still see her silhouette wherever I looked, I squeezed my eyes shut then opened them wide to see her again but Dhana was getting smaller and smaller every time until, in the end, she turned into a small dot which I last saw on my father's forehead

THE MILKY BRIDE

there are things you can't predict, like the fog
a familiar song slips its tongue under the door of the dairy
that's him, Kooka, the Hook, the village idiot

dogs and carrion in the ripe berries
the belly of the calf is warm
a horse of bronze chews on cherries
a hook and a cross in the storm

is that you, Kooka, I thought it was Nemanja, only he comes to the dairy this late, is that you, yes, it's him, my heels begin to tingle with fear, the dusk is creeping down my throat, the shadow in the doorway keeps singing its song, Kooka closes the door slowly, the dusk is already inside, finally in my body, it has

gripped my throat and, a silver glow is coming through the little window of the dairy but is blocked by the one who's coming in, by his song

the eye of the snake is a hook, my dear
the eye of the snake is an ear

I haven't seen you for a while, Kooka, are you here to get some milk, I have just poured out ours, ten litres and a half, is your cow still alive, didn't it die several months ago, my body – a night butterfly fastened to the wall with the pins of his eyes, eyes black as olives, pitch-black eyes, without a body, without pupils, eyes without white, I stay still

the snake is hungry feed him
come on, milky bride, water him

the shadow comes nearer and sings quietly, its back doesn't let the light get to me, the milk is all white in the copper vat, it's still rippling because I have just drunk from it with my hands cupped, there's milk dripping down my elbows only two more steps and the shadow will cover me all over, I start for the door but the shadow blocks my way, I go west, there it is, I go east and there it is, I pull my plait tight

Kooka, I am going to be married off tomorrow, are you coming to the celebration, I start saying words, didn't your cow die several months ago, I keep on talking, that's how it is done, the idiot must be spoken to in order to prevent the wild thoughts from coming into his mind, in fact what I'm doing is delaying it, I'm delaying what there is to happen, what has already happened, it is just that in this dairy time is running slow

snake snail and hook
snake snail and hook

I can feel his breadth already, he has drunk milk before coming here, rumour has it that when it gets dark he goes to the goat barn and drinks milk right from the goats' teats, there are other rumours going round as well, but I don't want to hear about any of these, Kooka is now almost right next to me, he's leaning over me like a stone tower, I am a moth fastened to an adobe wall, with the pins of his

eyes, his eyes don't glow because embers glow only when you set them on fire, his eyes seem black, as in missing eyes, as in missing a person behind them

Kooka, stop, let me go

go play with the boys on the hill, I saw them on my way here, they are still there playing tip-cat, I will go home now and I won't tell anyone you have been here

I shouldn't have said this, Kooka's strong arms grab me by the waist and we plunge together headlong into the metal buckets filled with milk, we fall and the buckets begin to jingle like bells, the buckets of milk are our wedding buckets, my dress gets soaked in that pulp of milk and mud, the buckets jingle in the rhythm of the rider, ting ting ting ting and faster ting ting ting ting

get off, monster

Kooka's hand presses on my mouth, Kooka's hand is now a permanent part of my face, I see this hand and this unfamiliar body as mine, ting ting ting ting, I'm no longer in this picture, I'm looking at it from a distance, my hair floats in the warm milk, my eyes stare at a little hole in the wall which moves in the rhythm of the galloping horse, I haven't seen it before but there's light entering through it, the hole in the wall, yes, I see it for the first time, as of today this hole begins to exist because I can see it, this hole hurts, it hurts a lot

are you pure
pure

don't cry, Bekija, let whatever hurts stay here, I hear my mother say and the milk of life spills on my black dress and the bells fall silent, the snake is fed, I close my eyes

*the eye of the snake is a hook, my dear
the eye of the snake is an ear*

after breathing

Kooka stands up, fastens his pants with twine, his cheeks are burning, he

smiles at me and takes a look at me, he sees me for the very first time, hello Bekija, have you just arrived, I touch the place that feels wet, there's blood on my fingers

are you pure, Bekija

pure
daddy's boy

how many litres did the cow produce today, Kooka asks and starts kicking at a little stone, he starts playing with it, chasing it, kicking at it as if it were a ball, he's laughing and kicking it, a child

a little boy who doesn't cost twenty oxen, that's how much I cost, because he is a man, a grown-up man now, would they believe me or him, what do you think, there's no point telling anyone, I stand up and lean over the milk, I splash my face with milk, I splash where the red is, pink starts trickling down my thighs, I pull my plait tight, I smooth back my hair

I know what I'm going to do tonight
the child sees me and stops kicking at the stone

you're beautiful, do you want me to walk you home, it's already dark
no, Kooka, I will go back on my own

I can find the way home in the dark too

IN THE BOSOM OF THE RIVER

I hear it, some voice is whispering to me

wash yourself, drink water from your elbows, put three handfuls of water in your bosom, wet your apron and cover your face

I see the dress and the shoes grandma has given to me, the best man leads the wedding procession, we are walking down the dirt road, the fog gets mixed with the dust from the road, two mountain men go past us, they are carrying sacks on their backs, no, perhaps they are carrying two corpses, of a man and a

woman, they don't greet us, they are staring at the tips of their shoes, I, covered in blue light, in my patent leather shoes, with grandma on the one side, on the other is Nemanja, ugly, hunched and thin, everyone around carries either a rifle or a pistol, their muzzles go beyond the Prokletije, people walk to the beat of the davul, my father and my brother walk last leading the horses, my mother is next to them, she's weeping, several unfamiliar women in black walk behind them and cry, they pull their hair and howl like jackals, am I getting married or getting buried, I enter the room of my beloved Nemanja, where are you, grandma, can I lie down next to you for a bit, I lie down next to my beloved, he is handsome, in the darkness of the room, his face disappears and emerges again, is that you Nemanja, I love you, Bekija, but you don't know me, you can't love me, that's what the Kanun says, take off your dress, I take off my dress, everybody's waiting silently in front of the house, their bodies don't move, like stone, take off your shoes, I take them off, someone shouts *she's not pure*, the white sheet waves out of the window, the bride is not pure, pure she is not, she's not pure, she will perish young, she's not pure, my brother's crying, Bekija, my sister, my father strikes him across the mouth with the back of his hand, she's a fool, she should have sat on her tail, Nemanja takes out the cartridge from the trousseau, my father put it there before seeing me off, that's what the Kanun says, if the bride is not pure, she has to be shot by the groom with the cartridge given by her father as part of the trousseau, that's what the Kanun says, that's what the Kanun says, the women in black are pulling their hair and begin to wail louder, they are tearing their faces with their nails, they want to take off their masks, to change their faces, the hoarseness in their throats, the wet kerchiefs, I can't hear the bells of the goats, I can't hear them, *you've got a hand of gold, Nemanja, shoot straight, shoot, my son*, Nemanja takes aim and shoots at my breasts, I can't feel anything, I am still standing upright, there a red dot on my dress

am I dying or being born

now everything will end, Nemanja goes in front of the house, everyone's clapping quietly, the village idiot comes into the room, is that you, Kooka, it's me, he lifts me from the bed and, carrying me in his arms, he takes me out through the door, now I can hear them, the bells of the goats soothe me, Kooka is cradling

me in his arms towards the bosom of the river, these are no longer wedding bells, this is the funeral toll

wash yourself, drink water from your elbows, wet your apron and cover your face

I wake up

I get out of bed, I kneel on the floor and take the box with the trousseau from under the bed, the cartridge is there, on my blue dress, I am going to be married off tomorrow, I take the cartridge, go to the hall and put it into the pocket of my father's coat, then I wake him up, I will become an ostajnica, are you sure, I am, are you pure, I'm pure

wake your mother and Salle up, the wedding is off

THE BLACK BAND

since I was born
I've always wanted mommy to dress me
in yellow clothes only
if she picks out another colour
I start crying
because even in my mother's tummy
I could hear various things
such as my father saying
I want a sun

Bekija, my girl, we'll perish, ostajnica, how come, that's what I want, mommy, this means we have stained the groom's honour, you will drag us into a blood feud, we'll perish because of you, my daughter, we'll perish, ostajnica, how come, what else did you want, what devil's gotten into you, shut up, witch, that's her will, the Kanun says she can change her mind before the wedding and become an ostajnica, she's neither the first nor the last in this village, we'll protect the family honour and blood will be shed, that's the way it is, the Kanun is above everything, Bekija, make your choice, my father hands me the black band, who says you can't touch death

you can, on the arm of someone doomed to die, the black band on the arm of every second man in the village, on everyone involved in a blood feud, on everyone who will have to die, on everyone who will have to kill, Nemanja will have to kill someone from our family to restore his honour, Bekija, make your choice now, me or your brother

my brother's crying, there are no tears on his face, my father's breathing hard, the Kanun has finally reached him, it makes his chest puff up, with the law supreme, the law of honour, my father raises his left arm, my mother's crying, I look at my father's arm, if he could do it, he would raise his entire body for that honour, if it's possible not to die from some disease or in his sleep, if he can choose, he will die with two fingers of honour in the middle of his forehead, a move of my arm and the picture is gone, Bekija, make your choice, the air is getting thicker, the ceiling is getting lower

all this shouldn't have happened

*the snake is hungry feed him
come on, milky bride, water him*

the thick beams are getting closer to their heads, I take Salle's arm and put the black band on it, my mother lets out a cry the way mothers do when they learn their son has died in the war, her long skirt wipes the room and curls behind the door like black smoke, the ceiling goes back into place, the air begins to thin out, breathing's coming back

Salle stands still, he no longer trembles, he doesn't cry
Salle is already dead, that's why Salle doesn't breathe

it's up to you to prove your manliness, Salle, it's up to you to stain it, my father says, he kisses my brother on the cheeks and leaves the room

here's the son you wanted, Murash, here he is, my mother is wailing in the basement, her weeping seeps through the whole house, through the beams it passes upstairs, crosses the ceiling, pushes on the tiles of the roof, one of them shatters to pieces on the concrete pathway, the cat jumps into the box bushes, my mother's wail drifts above all the houses in the village and looks for an open window



Zachary KARABASHLIEV

is a novelist and playwright. He is the author of the novels *18% Gray* and *Fallow Lands*, the novella *Thirst* and the short story collections *A Brief History of the Airplane*, *Symmetry*, and *Recoil*, as well as essays, plays and screenplays.

He has won the Novel of the Year Award from the 13 Centuries of Bulgaria Fund, the Novel of the Year Award from the Vick Foundation, the Hristo G. Danov Prize, the Helikon Prize, *Comunitas*, and others.

His writing has been translated and published in the United States, France, Poland, Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia, and has been included in the prestigious American anthology *Best European Fiction 2018*. His stage plays have been staged in Bulgaria and abroad: *Sunday Evening* won the Bulgarian Askeer Award for dramaturgy (2009), while *Recoil* won the Audience Award at the Wiesbaden Theatre Biennial, Germany (2012). *Lissabon* was staged at the legendary La Mamma Theatre in New York City in April 2014.

Between 1997 and 2014, the author lived in the United States. Since 2014 Zachary Karabashliev has been editor-in-chief of the Bulgarian publishing house *Ciela*.

THIRST

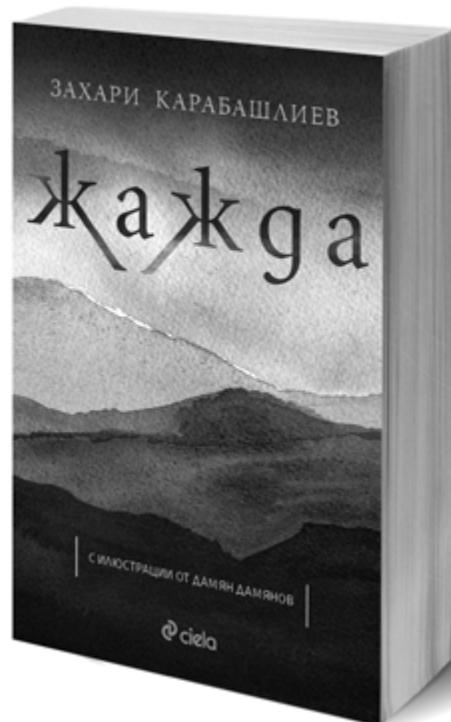
Synopsis

Thirst is a novella that hit the market on December 5, 2018, with watercolor illustrations by the artist Damyan Damyanov and which leads the reader through the world of shadows.

A young man wakes up in the hospital with no memory of the terrible accident he miraculously survived. Immobilized in a body cast, the only thing he can do is stare at the ceiling of the hospital room and listen in irritation to the voice of the elderly patient in the bed next to him. Fate could hardly have thrown two more different characters together – the old man's garrulous optimism collides with the young man's bitter skepticism. And what begins as a banal conversation to kill time gradually unfolds into a dramatic story about physical survival, about the life-saver that is love and about the victory of beauty over darkness.

What do we hear when we listen? What do we see when we look? Why does life sometimes take away what is most precious to us in order to give us what is most important?

In a world in which everyone is convinced that he is unique, there is one thing that fundamentally binds us together. Thirst.



THIRST

Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel

At the age of 18 years, three months and two days, I lost my sight. They lied to me for the first few weeks after that, said it was just my body's natural reaction. They fed me the line that my vision would come back, that it was only temporary, yaddayaddayadda... Bullshit. Life is an incredible thing. The human body is a perfect machine, but you have to be careful with it.

I tried to end my life back then. I tried a couple times, but kept making a hash of it – once with electricity, then I tried hanging myself, I drank some kind of poison and puked my guts out, but clearly I wasn't all that serious about that business, now that I think about it with the distance of time. Because if I'd really wanted to, I would've found somewhere to jump off of, right? But that's another story. How I overcame the horror of my blindness is also a whole other story. A whole other story. But take it from me. It's horrible. Blindness is horrifying, whatever anyone might tell you to the contrary, however they might try to spin it. Losing your eyes is horrible. There's no worse punishment for a human being! Nothing can replace the world outside, there is nothing like a beautiful sunset, like a dark starry sky, or like a blossoming cherry tree, or like holding a chestnut, a freshly budded chestnut! To see a candle burning or a flower in bloom or a child laughing, a pair of beautiful eyes... the veins in a leaf – just look how life is transparent when you hold it against the sunlight. All that's gone, gone, gone for good. Yet man is made to see, to revel in and discover the world's transparency. Because the world is more transparent than we think. We only realize that too late, sometimes far too late.

But now I want to tell you about that student summer camp, near the "Holiday" bus stop, and my first encounter with the sea, which I had never seen before then in any case. Perhaps it was my very thirst to see it that urged me to go out swimming alone that morning early. Daniel, I was angry, I was furious that I couldn't see it with my own two eyes. I was furious. When I could've seen it, they wouldn't let me near it. And now that I was swimming in it, I could no longer see it. I was furious.

So what I'm saying is that I must've gotten disoriented, because a motor boat passed close by me and startled me, so maybe I started swimming in the oppo-

site direction, then another motor boat passed. And I must've gotten all turned around. And when those noisy boats disappeared in the distance and everything calmed back down, I suddenly found myself in silence. Complete silence. I can't hear anything. I can't hear the shore. I can't hear the seagulls. I don't know where I am, there's only the sound of the sea. Calming, you might say. But it isn't. My only reference point in the water is the sound of the shore. There's nothing else. It's not like a river – if it's not one bank, then it's the other. In the sea, if I don't know where the shore is – I'm done for. And so I start swimming – I more or less think I can tell where the sun is by the warmth on my eyelids. I'm trying not to panic, because panic is the worst of all. So I swim, once in a while I take a break to rest, then I start swimming again. Now there's nothing I'd like more than to hear a motorboat or something else. But there's nothing. And the waves – short, sharp, misleading – they keep pounding and pounding, slightly choppy and seeming to come from everywhere at once. And I keep telling myself, Angel, Angel, my boy, this is the sea that you so wanted your whole life, there's a reason it was forbidden to you. God took your eyes so you wouldn't see this sea of his. But no, you had to come here anyway. You want the sea? Well, here's the sea for you! God took your eyes, now he'll take the whole of you, he'll send you down to feed the fish. Those kinds of thoughts started going through my head, too, Daniel. All kinds of thoughts started going through my mind. I remember that I was really sad back then that I hadn't ever been with a woman. That's just how things worked out – I was a fine, strapping young lad, but then the whole tragedy with losing my eyes struck and I was still a virgin. The only naked woman I had ever seen was an old lady who must've been eighty, they were giving her an enema. It was in the hospital right before I went blind, they were pushing me in a wheelchair, we passed a room with an open door and voila – that glimpse of the old lady and the enema. The color of her feet, dry and cracked, her skin, as gray as clay, everything else – you can imagine it for yourself. And I said to myself – is that what you'll take with you as your memory of woman, Angel? Is that what you'll be left with? Better not to have seen it at all. Better to have been left with your fantasies. But oh well. And so, lots of time has already passed since morning, and I'm somewhere out in the Bay of Varna, I have no idea where north or south is, where "Holiday" is, where the Odessa Hotel is. I swim in one direction, counting in my head, then I turn and swim for the same number of counts in the opposite direction, but what I'm doing this for, why I think it will help, Lord only knows. I start getting tired. My shoulders aren't used to this much paddling. What's more, my only point of reference, the sun, has gone and hidden behind a cloud, it's suddenly overcast,

it's equally dark everywhere, you know how that happens sometimes, and so just imagine – yours truly like a little dot, paddling furiously back and forth. And I've already been in the water a good long time. My body temperature has fallen, my shoulders are completely exhausted – I might be a strong swimmer and all, but can you swim around aimlessly for hours and not wear yourself out? And I'm starting to feel something else, too – the thirst. Since I've been in the sea a long time now, and in the morning I don't remember drinking any water, and my mouth is constantly full of salt water – I've gotten really thirsty. And now that's a problem I really can't deal with. I start feeling something more terrible than exhaustion coming over me – helplessness.

At a certain point, when I'm totally kaput – you know that word, right? it means exhausted – I roll over onto my back and let myself lie back the water, I just let myself lie back all nice and relaxed, I spread out my arms and legs, I catch my breath, I try to catch my breath, you know how loud your breathing sounds when your ears are under water, then you hear your breathing as if someone else is breathing inside you, as if the sea itself is breathing in your head. I breathe and breathe, I match my breathing to the waves, almost as if the sea and I are becoming one. And I start talking to myself, telling myself that everything is as it should be. This is what was meant to happen. So I'll relax now, I'll accept my fate, I'll give myself over to nature and my body will return to the material, and my soul will go back to wherever it came from, back to the divine. I'm telling myself – see, Angel? Everything is just as it should be, you're studying philosophy at the university now, you take exams in ancient philosophy, you must take things heroically, and not panic. Leave yourself to the mercy of the divine, of nature. With or without you, the world will still be the same. Nothing will disappear, you'll just change from one form into another, but the essence will remain. I'm telling myself this, and if you ask me now, I was trying to calm myself down, it's the anesthesia of thought. There are times when the rational mind has to play the role of the anesthesiologist, right? And I can feel how I'm drifting, drifting, but whether I'm dozing off or meditating, I can't say. Until at some point a silvery-red imprint of a human figure appears on the inside of my eyelids. The silhouette of a spread-eagled man. Like that drawing of Leonardo's, with his arms and legs spread wide, soaring just as I am in that moment –soaring in the pulsing darkness beneath my eyelids. And I watch him for a good long time, telling that imprint: I don't know who or what you are, but bring me back to the shore if you can. I'm saying this to the figure. Back in the day at the village fairs – they had these traveling fairs back then, complete with stands full of baubles, would-be Houdinis, monkeys

with red backsides, the world's fattest women complete with a moustache and beard, wrestlers, dancers and magicians, dwarves, deformed people – one's got no stomach, another's got no hands, all kinds of folks, who knows where the heck they found them... Anyway, they had these circus tents back then, where they showed all kinds of stuff – from sheep with two heads to a female vulva in a jar... There was a trick they did back then, it was called "the invisible man." You go into this dark tent, they blind you by shining a bright light in your eyes and a man appears in front of you. Then they turn on the lights – the guy isn't there, he's gone. But if you close your eyes – you see him, when you open your eyes – he's gone. It must be some kind of optical illusion, but that's what the trick was called: "the invisible man." And so there I am, out at sea, on my back, my arms spread wide and beneath my eyelids that invisible man appears again. Or maybe the sun had peeked out from behind a cloud, or something had happened in my brain or in my memories, who knows? But I turn directly to that invisible man at that moment, and speak to him, I tell him: look, do whatever you're going to do, but at least let it mean something. The whole deal with taking my eyes was completely unnecessary, if you ask me. Now you've decided to drown me, I have no idea why, I'm sure you have your reasons, but I really don't see the point. If there is one, explain it to me, I'm begging you, I'm really begging you, since you're going to take me in any case, I won't give away your secrets to anyone, your deep dark secrets. Just explain it to me. He is silent, but I keep going. What was the point in blinding me first, why didn't you just take me then? Why did you leave me to suffer without my sight, to get used to getting along without what is most precious to me – my eyes, to keep on living my life... Only to toss me in this soft sea here and drown me. I simply don't understand. And so on. I dialogue, I bargain with the image in my mind, with the invisible man, but I also calm down, catch my breath, I rest, I relax, I lie back, I grow lighter...

And I realize that this invisible man now, his arms and legs spread wide, is my imprint upon the world. I am the one spreading his arms and legs, I am my own invisible man.



Stephan KOSPARTOV

majored in English and American Studies at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski and in Film Studies in the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts. These two majors have determined the course of his creative path. He served as an assistant director for the Bulgarian films *Adaptation*, *The Patent Leather Shoes of the Unknown Soldier*, and *Everything Is Love*. He is the writer of the Bulgarian films *In Custody*, *I Am You*, and *Shakespeare and the Others*.

WHEN THE CHESTNUTS START FALLING

Synopsis

When the Chestnuts Start Falling, written by the writer of the film *In Custody* (*Myarka za neotklonenie*), Stephan Kospartov, is an impressive tale about the terror inflicted by the communist regime and the absurdity of life in Bulgaria from 1944 to 1989 and in the early years of “democracy.”

In the winter of 1946 Dimo Kosturkov, a Doctor of Law at the Sorbonne, travels to war-devastated Bulgaria. Brimming with hopes and ideals, on the train he meets the beautiful Anna who is going home for her father’s funeral. Right after they arrive at the platform, they face the brutal reality – the communists have usurped power and they won’t let go. The two young people are about to come to know the true face of the regime – the violence, the torture, the camps, the expatriation. . .



Decade later the regime is writhing in its death throes. Carefully devised plans for conserving power and accumulated treasures are put into action. Whirlwind changes, demonstrations, choices, victory feasts and crushing defeats are about to happen. Amidst all the chaos of sudden freedom, the young writer Nikola Kosturkov has to find out the truth about his father and his fate. In the meantime, his love for Adriana is like a force of nature that punctures time and space and transcends crime and punishment.

How many generations need to come and go to set in motion the wheel of history?

Weaving real events and magical realism, weaving together and reviving the search of the writers from the 1960s, *When the Chestnuts Start Falling* will undoubtedly remain one of the greatest novels in Bulgarian literature – as a requiem-in-advance for the generations to come and as a tale for the one who leaves at the end of the summer. When the chestnuts start falling.

WHEN THE CHESTNUTS START FALLING

Excerpt / Translated by Annie Dancheva

I pack my baggage in this order: the shoes and the pants go at the bottom, then two sweaters – one thick and one light, a turtle-neck and two long-sleeved shirts, a few T-shirts, underwear and toiletries. At the last minute I remember to put in a few pairs of socks, one of them woolen, just in case. I wonder if I should take the manuscript of the novel, but I don’t really need it. My mother can decide what to do with it. I place the compass by the razor, I zip up the bag and slide it under my bed. I leave the new jacket on the coat hook, I put on the old one – light and more appropriate for the season, plus it has a large inner pocket that seems to have been tailored just to hold the 12-lev knife I have just bought. But I have to take out the money because it makes the pocket bulge. I move the wads of money into one of those bags that are worn with a strap around the wrist and you could say I’m almost ready. Almost, because the knife isn’t sharp. That means I’ll have to stop by Uncle Misho’s.

I remember, for a long time I thought that was the name of the neighborhood knife sharpener until one day my father explained to me that that was, in fact, the name of the former knife sharpener. He had died. His son Petar took his place. They left the sign board which to this day says “Uncle Misho’s Knife Sharpening.” Little by little, everyone started calling Petar “Misho,” even his own wife. At first, it made Petar angry and he threatened to take down the sign board, but, eventually, he got used to his new name and there was one time when he got a message with Petar Petrov written on it, and at first he wondered who that could be.

“Coming too late, kiddo,” Uncle Misho grumbled, yet took the knife in his hand and switched on the grinder.

The sparks fly up around the half-lit room like fireworks and I’m thinking whether it wouldn’t be different if my father hadn’t died at the train station, if my brother hadn’t died at the border, if I wasn’t me, but someone else, a closer friend of luck.

“Hold this paper.” Uncle Misho hands me a sheet from a notebook. I grasp it on one side, he lifts it up from the other and runs the knife through the middle. The blade cuts the paper in a straight line, without tearing it.

“You’re done,” he says and adds the phrase he uses instead of “goodbye”: “Just be careful you don’t get yourself slaughtered!”

I doubt it, I’m thinking as I’m stretching out my hand with the two levs I owe him. I’m not Japanese, after all.

“Can I slaughter someone else?” I ask.

“You can, he-he-he,” Uncle Misho laughs.

His laughter resounds in my head all the way to the post office, where it is replaced by the hasty buzzing of incoming and outgoing people. The telephone booths are in the lobby, in other words in the worst possible place if you don’t want people to hear what you’re talking about, but that’s not the case with me. They pick up on the other end of the line after the third ring.

“Good evening, Aunt,” I say. “How are you?”

We start a long and not especially meaningful conversation in which, apart from the basic weather conditions in Sofia and my mother’s health, I manage to explain that I intend to go to Varna and I’d be happy if she could take me in for a few days, starting tomorrow.

“So it’s arranged,” I say, cutting off my aunt’s desire to continue her monologue. “All right, goodbye, I have to go now, I’m calling from a pay phone and the line will be cut off at any second.”

I hang the receiver back up. Now I can safely go get myself something to drink. It’s my birthday today, after all.

The Prague coffee-and-pastry shop on Rakovska Street isn’t a place I like, but it’s the one closest to the post office, so I go there. I sit at a table for two and order a glass of cognac. The waitress brings it almost right away and I’ve barely had a sip to my own health when, wobbling, single-mindedly headed in my direction, comes a handsomely drunk client.

“It’s occupied,” I say, but he pays no attention and plops down in the chair across from me, muttering something like: “That doesn’t matter.”

Let’s hope he stays silent, I tell myself, but, yeah, that’s just wishful thinking.

“Will you buy me one?” he asks, setting his dim gaze on me.

“Nope,” I say, as calmly as I can.

“Pancho, go home, cut the drinking!” the waitress says as she passes by my table, coming to my rescue.

Looks like Pancho doesn’t like being told not to drink and bristles up, militant.

“I’ll mooch off someone,” he states, swallowing half of the consonants.

In all probability that someone will be me, because he stretches his hand over the table and tries to grab me by the collar. I push him away and he gets stuck back to his chair, trying to summon up the strength for another go. It becomes clear to me that this guy isn’t going to leave me alone, so I drink half of my cognac in one gulp and wave at the waitress who is standing close by anyway, waiting for a scandal to break out. I manage to pay the bill before he has gotten up off his chair. He still finds a way to reach past the girl and grab me by the collar that he seems to like so much. The waitress tries to push him away, but he’s too heavy for her and I decide to lend her a hand, I move her aside a bit and my fist ends up in his face. It doesn’t take much with a drunk – Pancho’s eyes go white and he collapses on the spot.

“Whyddya hit him, huh?” Some hero in a white sweater from the table next to mine jumps up.

“Don’t, Boré!” his buddy tries to subdue him.

“Get out of here, quick!” the waitress whispers to me and shoves me towards the door. “And you stay out of it!” she yells at the Boré guy. “Can’t you see the man here is not the guilty party?”

“Guilty, not guilty, why did he hit him?” Boré hesitates for a moment and I take that opportunity to dash out of the café.

Rakovska Street is busy at this hour. Some people are in a hurry to get somewhere, others are strolling around, it’s late to some, early to others. I’m of the

second kind. It's still not seven, which means that I have at least two hours to contemplate how minutes die away, condemned by their own ephemerality. The thing is I have to find the right place for that.

The solution strikes me as I'm buying cognac from the shop on Slaveykov Square. I'm not buying the cognac for myself, but for the visit I'll be paying later tonight. As I'm waiting at the register, I notice that apart from the regular bottles, there are 100-ml nips. Then it comes to my mind that Kosta responded particularly kindly to that kind of small packaging and specifically recommended it for film screenings. You take one or two nips, Nikush, you sit in the cinema and tipple. As though you're at home in front of the screen. Which reminds me that with Adriana we often went to the Culture Cinema. Short films are screened there and usually there aren't many visitors, most are them are like us – not here for the film as much as for the chance to be together for a bit longer.

The cashier hands me the ticket with that weary indifference that takes people over at the end of their shift. The film is titled *Angel of Mine*, there are twelve people in the theater. I'm the thirteenth one, which leads me to the suspicion that I might get myself into some kind of a mess, considering my luck today. A couple comes in right after me, making us fifteen, so there's nothing to worry about any more. I pick a seat away from everyone else and settle myself comfortably in it. The lights go off and I take the cap off the bottle as Kosta had wisely suggested. I clink the bottles and take a sip. Images as boring as angels, but not as beautiful move across the screen. A father at first understands his daughter, then he doesn't, but she doesn't understand him at all. Gradually I lose track of the plotline because I have a screen of my own onto which is another film is being projected, a much more interesting one, since it tells my own story.

I can see quite clearly that same movie theater, it's still dark, there are again few people, but I'm not alone. Adriana is sitting by my side. The light coming from the screen throws glittering dots in her eyes which I'm trying to drink up in vain.

"You've got light in your eyes, give it to me!" I plead with her, but this happens there, in the other film; the truth is right now I'm sitting alone, the big bottle is by my side and the small one is in my hand.

Actually there is a pause due to a power surge. The camera starts moving again and I'm unlocking the door with a name plate "Kostukovs." Adriana and I cross the hall and we walk into my room, holding our shoes in our hands, so my mother doesn't hear us. We take our clothes off quickly, leaving the light off.

Adriana's skin is smooth as a dove's feather and I press myself closer and closer against her body as thousands of stars explode before my eyes and spill into the dark like fireworks.

"Do you know I've never loved another girl so much?" I ask, scared of my own confession.

"How wonderful that is," Adriana whispers, "and how dangerous!"

"Why do you think it's dangerous?" I cry, but I can't hear the answer, because Waltz #2 blares out and we're dancing on the tram tracks under my parent's approving gazes. My parents join the dance, but all of a sudden Tassev appears with two of his goons, they grab my father and take him somewhere, the people make way for them and we're left alone on the tram tracks, where did everyone go?

Music sounds throughout the theater, too, it seems the father and the daughter have finally resolved their problem, she's pacing dressed in white beside a handsome swarthy man, the father wipes his tears away secretly in an outburst of fatherly fondness. This seems like the logical ending of the whole story – the film is over, thus thwarting the rising wave of regret washing over me for not having bought another nip.

I slip out of the theater quietly with the rest of the half-asleep spectators, I have scarcely stepped outside when I feel how heavy the air inside the cinema had been. I breathe in deeply and I walk up Graf Igrantieff Street with quick steps. Somewhere there, near Moscow Cinema, opposite the law offices is the place of my late-night visit. On the ground floor of an old building with a peeling façade is one of Tassev's safe-houses that I have already been to once before.

It was after I came back from the seaside with Adriana and she told me that she didn't want to see me because she needed to think about whether our relationship had a future. Tassev welcomed me heartily like an old pal. He poured me a glass of aged whiskey and asked me if I had seen Adriana. When he saw my answer was in the negative, he said, "Keep it up. Otherwise our thing isn't going to work. You want it to work, right?"

"I do."

"That's good. Now listen closely. I met a Belgian guy in Las Palmas. He's in Varna now. He may have found you a job on his ship."

The meaning of what he said slowly crystalized in my mind.

"But how am I going to get onboard without a contract?" I asked hesitantly.

"That's for him to arrange," he said and when he saw I was of two minds, he added: "Think about it. You'll be in Marseille in two weeks' time. But it will cost you."

“How much?”

“Five thousand dollars. It’ll be like you’ve gone on a Mediterranean cruise.”

Here I am now. Hiding behind a news stand, the money sitting in the little bag like lizards in a bell jar, expecting to change owner. Tassev is waiting for me and I’m waiting for 9 o’clock to strike. That’s the arrangement – no one should see us together. It is especially important to him that this rendezvous remain secret. It’s even more important to me, but he doesn’t know that, and that’s even worse for him. He doesn’t know that I don’t plan on getting onboard, otherwise he wouldn’t be offering such a deal. Except if he has too low of an opinion of me, which isn’t completely out of the question.

Finally the butterflies in my stomach stop fluttering and my uneasiness is replaced by tense anticipation. A few moments later the lamps at the entrance turn on – an apparent sign that someone is coming down the stairs. I wait for ten minutes just in case and come out of my hiding spot. My legs feel oddly wobbly and my body feels like it’s hanging in the air. I feel my inner pocket and unbutton the strap that keeps the knife fastened. That makes it easy to pull it out in one swift move. I can feel my palms sweating and I squeeze the bottle of cognac tightly. Deep inside, I feel an unstoppable urge to drink all the booze, break the bottle and go home. A wave of regret washes over me and the moisture in my eyes make the door in front me look double.

“God, make it quick, please!” I beg and my eyes go dry. I press the bell with my heart sinking, naively toying with the thought that Tassev might not hear. But I hear footsteps approaching and he opens the door.

“Come in,” he says and takes me straight into the living-room. “You’re late!”

“I waited until nine o’clock,” I respond and leave the bottle on the table by the couch. “I’ve brought you some cognac. It’s my birthday today.”

“Oh, happy birthday!” Tassev says over his shoulder and walks over to the cupboard to take out two glasses. “We’re celebrating then.”

No doubt about it, I think as I unscrew the cap and pour the cognac, but say only, “Cheers!”

“To your health!” Tassev takes a sip and relaxes on the sofa.

This central piece of living-room furniture is mantled with a bright green fur throw – a product of the oil refining industry, onto which Tassev projects himself as a minuscule brownish spot.

I decide it was high time I said something to the point.

“I have the money,” I drop nonchalantly, trying to mask my insecurity with a decent gulp of alcohol.

The spot shifts in its place, crosses its legs and lights a cigarette.

“Let’s see,” Tassev says and holds his hand out.

I take out one of the wads. He takes it and starts counting the bills voraciously. There’s no mistake – a hundred banknotes of fifty dollars – a full five grand.

“Good luck, boy!” he croaks and rubs the wad against his cheek. Then he hands it back to me and gives me a meaningful look.

“Put it away. Let’s not get distracted.”

Tassev walks out of the room and leaves me alone. There’s some clock mechanism tick-tocking inside of me, changing the hot waves into cold ones as if I were an animal in mating season. My teeth are a numb and the butterflies settle back into my stomach.

I unzip my jacket and at this moment Tassev returns. His face is stretched into a content smile. He settles back on the sofa and tries to adopt a businesslike stance.

“Now, listen to me carefully! It’s the seventeenth today. On the twenty-second, that is Monday, shortly before three in the afternoon you have to be at the train station in Varna. You go and stand under the station’s clock and when it strikes three on the dot, you go and drop your luggage in locker 19. If it’s already taken, pick another one that ends in 9. Then you walk away and return shortly before four, stand under the clock again and when it strikes four on the dot and you collect your luggage. That’s how the Belgian will know it’s you. He’ll introduce himself to you. All you need to know for now is that his name is Guillaume. When you hear that name, you walk away with the man. You’ll give him the money and don’t worry about anything else! And now cheers, a toast to your health!”

He takes a sip of the cognac as though he’s drinking coffee and smacks noisily.

“When were you born?”

“1960.”

“Yeah, right, I remember when you were born. So it’s a full 30 now, right?”

“Yes, a full 30,” I nod affirmatively. “Do you know that the Germans have a saying: ‘Don’t entrust a serious task to someone under thirty.’ I wouldn’t either.”

“Damn right,” Tassev says, nodding his head, and pours himself another glass. “Nice boy that you are, you should know that. Just don’t get scared!”

“I’m not scared,” I say and I feel the pocket of my jacket. “What should I be scared of?”

“Of the travel. Your father was a traveler, right?”

Tassev waves his hand and bursts into laughter. A vein on his neck bulges, pulsating in time with cheerfulness, disappearing and reappearing like a small floating molehill.

“What if he doesn’t come?” I cut him off.

“Who?”

“The Belgian. Guillaume.”

“Why wouldn’t he? If I’m saying he will, then it’s as if he already has. I guarantee you that! America is paying.”

Laughter makes his veins bulge again.

“Your man Tassev knows about these things. There’s nothing to be afraid of as long as you’ve made up your mind. And the most important thing – don’t tell anyone: not your mother or your father, or anyone else.”

My stomach clenches, as if to push all possible heartburn up to my throat.

“My father is dead,” I say through gritted teeth, so that the bile doesn’t slip out of my mouth. “You know that.”

“That’s a good thing,” he mumbles admonishingly. “Why would he need this life? He did make himself useless.”

Looks like Tassev wants to die in a good mood. His throaty laughter fills up the room like an impregnable balloon, I start feeling claustrophobic there. Something starts choking me, my soul seems to have clenched along with my stomach, unable to do much else other than basic speculation that if you’ve once made up your mind about doing something, it would be a crude mistake to wait for too long before taking action. Like jumping off a really high place – the more you look down, the greater the height looks.

“I loved him,” I say in an unnaturally loud voice. “And I still do.”

Tassev looks at me with a mixture of bewilderment and ridicule and I remember that I haven’t come here to tell him about the love I have for my father, but for a wholly other thing that I was on the verge of doing. My hand slowly and carefully pulls the knife out of the pocket of my jacket, my fingers clasp around the hilt slowly. I observe their movements as if someone else has taken control of them, I’m not in charge, someone who has settled inside of my body and tells my arms what to do. I myself wanted to ask him was it really my father and why him in particular, when he knows so many other people, but I don’t think I’ll have time for that because my hand goes up in the air and Tassev and I notice with growing surprise that the knife sinks into his throat straight into the place where life was pulsing a moment ago. Tassev’s surprise quickly becomes laced with pain, his eyes go dark, his mouth tries to bid life goodbye, but all that comes out of it is an inarticulate sound. That guy inside of me raises his hand again and strikes another blow and another one. . . Blood starts spurting out of his body, I did not expect so much blood to come out of it! Tassev bends sideways and the blood

begins to soak into the green fur throw. I am struck by the ridiculous thought that it is better this way because if he had fallen on the floor, now there would a pool of blood, but there isn’t. His fingers contort and then relax, his head tilts to the side unnaturally.

This must be death, I tell myself. This must be death when you look at it from up close.

This thought is perfectly mine and I understand that that guy, the other one, has slipped out of my body imperceptibly and has left me alone with that body, curled up on the sofa with the blood streaming out of it. I poke him lightly, but I get no reaction whatsoever. The only thing that still links this body to life is its odor. It is thick and sticky like the vital juices that trickle out of it. I feel I have to get out of this place as fast as I can because I might get sick very soon. I head for the door. I feel like my footsteps are resounding through the whole flat. I can’t imagine how I could go down the stairs without anyone hearing me. So at the last minute I decide it’s safer to go through the window. It gets jammed and then opens with a loud noise that made me all the more dizzy. I prop my leg on the sill and I land on the pavement out front with a thud. A single thought flaps back and forth like a table tennis ball: “I gotta get outta here right now!” My legs fall into synchrony with this thought and start keeping time. I have to – quickly. Left – right. Get – out. Left – right. Farther and farther away down the supposedly familiar streets. It’s weird – I know the neighborhood, yet I don’t know where I am. I give the fence I walk by a dull look, but it doesn’t trigger any lever in my brain beside the vague memory that once, as I child, I had jumped over it.

This isn’t normal, I tell myself and then notice two things: the blood on my hands and the tap behind the fence. I push open the little gate, walk in, turn the tap on and let the water run over my hands. At first, it sloshes down, clear, on my palms, but little by little the red spills into it the same way it did when we were kids and used to paint with water colors and had to wash the brushes. I wipe my jacket somewhat decently – it is handsomely covered with spurts and as I’m pondering over the dry blood under my fingernails, I notice another irregularity – my hands are completely free, although they weren’t on the way to Tassev’s home. In fact, I had on me the bottle and the bag with the money. The former I don’t need, which most definitely cannot be said about the latter because I’m lost without the money. No Belgian would pay me any attention because of my blue eyes and the blood under my fingers. I push myself hard and try to do the impossible – remember where I’ve lost it. That’s crap! I don’t know where I am and I expect to remember such a detail! The last thing I remember is that I took

out the wad, zipped up the little bag and left it in front of me. So, for all I know, it must still be there and if I want it back, I need to return to that unnaturally bent body and the sticky scent of a death that I had caused.

I step out onto the street and find to my surprise that in front of me, at its end, law offices are shimmering dimly. In fact, I'm still close to the cinema and more than a few minutes cannot have passed since I jumped out the window. I approach the house and my already sharpened senses detect that the light behind the window of the meeting place is still on, the two wings rattle a little in the draught. The sill isn't a high one, so it's practically no effort for me to pull myself up and to find myself inside the room once again. The bag is still on the table and it will take me just two steps to have it back, but suddenly it turns out to be more difficult than I thought because my legs are shaking and I can't move them, the corpse is waiting for me with its bulged eyes, wide with surprise.

At that moment someone presses the doorbell. Fear usually affects you in one of two ways – it either freezes you up or it makes you hurry. I fall into the second category. I make two leaps and I find myself by the lamp switch and the room is plunged in darkness. I hide behind the door and freeze, suddenly it strikes me how scary all this is – there's a corpse on the bed, his blood is slowly soaking in the fur throw, I'm standing there with the same blood under my nails and I realize that I won't allow anyone to see me like that, so I'll have to kill the person who enters the room, too. I hear footsteps coming up the stairs, then the door opens and closes.

It must be one of the neighbors, I'm thinking, and for the first time I pray for it not to be true. There, dawn will come soon and everything will turn out to have been just a terrible nightmare like one of those bad dreams I've been having lately. Now, I feel no pity for that cad on the sofa, but fear starts creeping up inside of me.

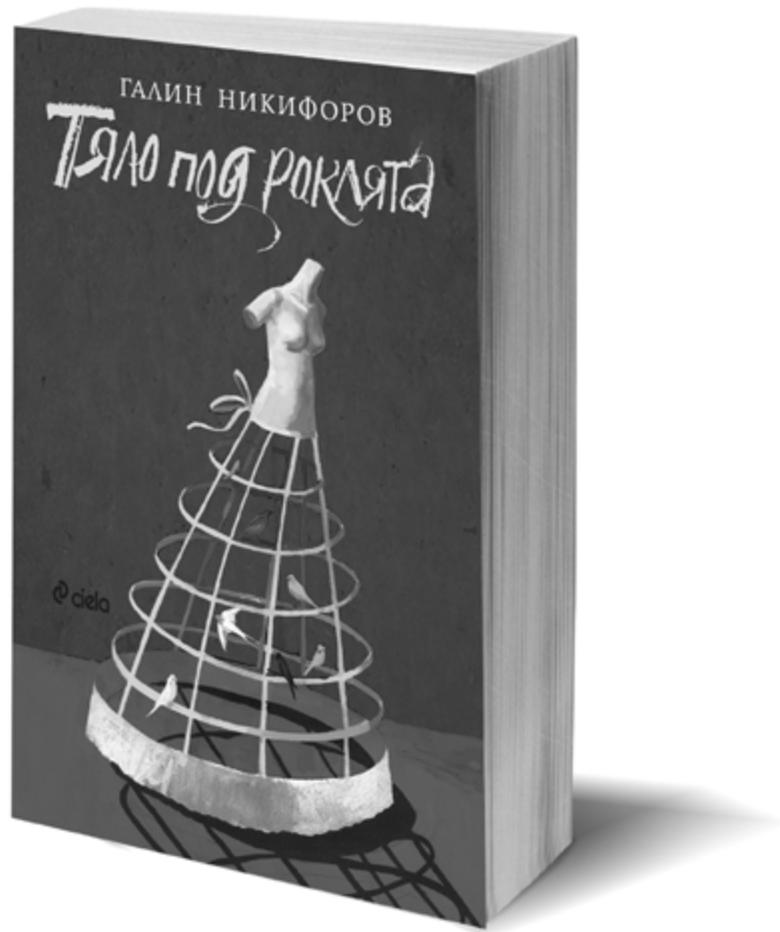
The door outside shuts close and, to my relief, the footsteps die away steadily up the stairs, then I hear the squeaking of the floor in the flat and everything descends in silence. I stay there, immobile, for some time, then I feel around for my bag in the dark and take the way back out the window. Somewhere in the distance the city clock strikes a beat, which means that I've already entered my thirty-first year.



Galin NIKIFOROV

is a distinguished name in contemporary Bulgarian literature. He is the author of such works as *Fairly Gently* (2003), *Good Guy* (2006), *The Photographer: Obscura Reperta* (2009), *Losers' Summer* (2010), *The House of Clowns* (2011), *The Fox* (2014), and *Body under the Dress* (2018). All his novels have been nominated for national awards, with *The Photographer* and *The Fox* being nominated for four of the most prestigious of them. Nikiforov has also won four awards for his work, including for *Losers' Summer* (Novel of the Year Award) and for *The House of Clowns* (Elias Canetti Award).

Nikiforov's work centers around human nature, with all its extremes, aspirations, psychological states and value systems, the meaning of death, feminism, the fluidity of the sex, extraordinary love. His novels are characterized by a detailed look at these topics, the combining of different writing styles; text enrichment by means of poetry; the use of quotes related to science, psychology, medicine and other arts. Nikiforov writes each of his books in an artistic style that is a specific to it, defined by the emotional features and nuances of the plot, using that style to accentuate the novel's main theme.



BODY UNDER THE DRESS

Synopsis

Body under the Dress is a story of redemption. A story about the love between a brother and a sister, twins that complement each other – each of them is not complete without the other. That is, until their relationship is painfully interrupted, and the very humanity within each of them is at stake.

This is a tale about the cage that is reality, which each of us builds with our own choices, and about the bird trapped in that cage, which is our own hope. The question that remains is whether love will be able to free it or will it let the bird die?

BODY UNDER THE DRESS

Excerpt / Translated by Desislava Toncheva

“And it’s a hard, it’s a hard, it’s a hard, it’s a hard
It’s a hard rain’s a-gonna fall” (Bob Dylan, “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall”)

Aunt Leo’s Boarding House, 2002

The heat has seeped through the air in Aunt Leo’s room like poison, and in the midst of its stillness the wallpaper on the walls makes slight crackling noises. This year’s summer hasn’t got an ounce of mercy.

“You’re becoming a better and better lover,” says Aunt Leo, her body stretched out naked over her bed. Her legs are seamlessly crossed, one on top of the other, and the brown bush in her pubic area moves slightly as she speaks. The stump of her cut-off hand is hidden under the pillow, and the other one is under her head. Her breasts are spilling over her wide ribcage like balloons, half-filled with water, her armpit hairs are clean shaven and the skin there is a bit paler, as if stained by spilled milk with poppy seeds in it.

Boris glances at her, slightly abashed, from the other side of the room, then continues to put his pants on diligently, as a few drops of sweat embroider the front of his shirt.

He has been sleeping with Aunt Leo almost every day for the past year, and despite the physical satisfaction, he always ends up feeling bad afterwards.

Yet this “bad” is far better than that suffocating and desperate “bad” which he has been feeling all the time, ever since Mrs. Caramel died. The memory of her death, which he caused (a double dose of sleeping pills and a quadruple dose of insulin), awakens something within his chest, in his stomach, tossing and turning, pounding from the inside. As if a crazy wicked small creature is trying to crush his ribs and escape, shake off the mucus, then spill all its hatred for the world through its black lips.

Boris’s continuing sex with Aunt Leo, and him being so addicted to it, has created within him a certain predictable, quiet feeling of disgust with himself, but that is something he’s already used to.

He’s aware that he cannot pull himself out of this trap, he cannot escape from his own burning desires, from his own gloomy passion. He could try to share all

this with Borissa, but she has her own problems to deal with in her new school, she doesn't let him in as much as before, and she is after all, a girl, he cannot tell her everything. He is almost a grown man, hormones are constantly raging in his loins, along with the waves of despair brought on by his own nature and actions.

Aunt Leo shoots him a smile and makes herself comfortable on the bed. Silver stretchmarks flash along her strong thighs like nylon cut up into thin strips. She has invested her whole ingenuity to ensuring the boarding house's future, and Boris's state of mind is nothing but a necessary evil, which will surely heal in time. This is all her masterpiece of manipulation and if her performance could receive some applause, it would sound like thunder.

On that first day, when she was seducing him, caressing him, stroking his forehead with her hand as a mother would when her child has a fever, in those very first moments, she had already planned it all out, talking to him about the boarding house's financial issues, and about Mrs. Caramel's huge inheritance, which could solve everything.

She knew even then that it would not be enough to just threaten his love for Borissa, she had to shake up his confidence, pit it against the hostility of the world lurking outside, as she knew Boris cared not only about his sister, but he also cared about the boarding house and its inhabitants, the old people and the kids. He's odd for a boy his age, much more mature, a clear sharp brain, unclouded by forced conventional education, led only by pure curiosity and intuition. But just like everyone, he has his needs, and his are dictated by his age. His heart is no longer the heart of a child and has begun cultivating its capacity for suffering, but his body is young, walking its own path, growing, it's almost that of a man's and it wants for a woman. And she found him one by giving him her own body, sure in herself that sex will be what tips the scales in her favor. And she was not wrong.

She had accumulated some longing of her own in all her years of loneliness, a longing that is no longer young and fresh, more like an old faded passion, a pale imitation of what's written in books and in movies, but it can still do the trick. It is enough to just keep caressing Boris, after she talks to him, to stroke his face a little more with her only hand, to stroke his back, his ears, his shoulders, to pull him close and to gently start rubbing up against him, until she can feel his arousal. After that it's a piece of cake, she puts her prosthetic under his shoulder blades, using it as a lever, her healthy hand reaches for his throbbing desire and begins doing what he wants her to, wielding the passion with her long cold fingers.

It was so easy to seduce him that first day, and it has been just as easy to make him her prisoner and fire him up every time, in a way that when she finally took

all that pleasure away, under the guise that she was worried, broke and ruined, it would scare him, undermine his security, make him capable of anything to save what he has.

After she managed all this, it was almost too easy for her to lead him back to her body, to make him want her like a baby wanting to breastfeed, and to finally give him back his peace, his triumph of flesh, which in time started to make her feel special in her own eyes, something she hadn't felt in years.

In the end, she fully let down the guard to her body and her imagination, in order to feed off the fire of sparkling pleasure, to worm herself into it, rediscovering herself, experienced and satisfied, in meaningless sex and in the unexpected nuances of her own power.

"I have a lot to do today," Boris mutters, straightening up the sleeves of his shirt. "I have to deal with the little ones, then clean the bird cages, and I've promised the elders a thing or two."

"Don't promise them too much. Don't get too attached to anyone," Aunt Leo hesitates, and, anticipating the dual meaning of what she's about to say, licks her lips, then goes on and says it: "Because it will be too hard to part with them."

"After I'm done, I'll take everyone out for some fresh air."

"You're spoiling them. You're always spoiling them ... You do know that after a year or two they won't be here anymore? Violet and Lilac will be twelve this winter, and the pensioners are unlikely to live much longer."

"They are the only people I know, those old people and those kids."

"And what am I?" Aunt Leo is challenging him, smiling softly, pleased with herself.

"Yes, you, too."

"And Borissa? What is she to you?"

"She doesn't count. She's my sister, my closest one." He wants to add *she's part of me*, but he pauses. He stopped telling Aunt Leo everything a long time ago, he could feel her using it against him.

"I like that you two are so close. But you have to learn to live without her. You are a man now."

"One has nothing to do with the other." There is something disturbing in Aunt Leo's voice, she knows more than she's letting on.

He hates her in moments like this.

(*"What do you mean I have to learn to live without Borissa?!..."*)

He feels like she is insulting him with her suspiciousness, her secrets, and her selfishness.

He walks to the window and pulls down the cloth shade to dim the room; just as Aunt Leo likes it, so that his departure won't seem as sudden. He smooths it with his hand a few times, and only then does he walk out.

The corridors are not as dark as they once were. Last year one of the children's uncles who owns a lamp shop put up luminescent lamps almost everywhere. Now their dead blue-white light keeps following Boris along as he walks in silence, lost in his thoughts. He is growing more and more attached to these long corridors, to the hollow semi-enclosed rooms, to this concrete palace of loneliness and the strange creatures that inhabit it. After the second death he caused, his need to care for the old people has grown even stronger and he's spent almost all his time dealing with them.

In the living room, everyone is exactly where he expects to find them. The girls are gathered around the children's table, most of them quietly drawing, and the three old men and the two widowed sisters are talking on the far side of the room.

"Snowdrop, open the right window, and you, Lilac, open the left one," he instructs the two children as usual as he approaches. Except for Violet, who has been in the boarding house for six years already, their names are no longer colors, but flowers; the change happened gradually about three years ago. Snowdrop, who has Down's syndrome, is so named because of the little bright spot on her forehead which looks like a broken snowdrop flower, and when Lilac arrived, she brought with her the strong scent of wildflowers, which seeped through her clothes and her hair.

These two girls have the lowest intellectual abilities in the group, which is why Boris always makes them perform the easiest tasks in the clearest way possible. Their development has not advanced much since they came to the boarding house. There is no salvation for them, the two are just "walking dolls" in the classification of Boris, and in that of Aunt Leo, which he does not like, they are creatures "stuck in the associative phase."

The girls clap their hands loudly, then head to the nearby windows. Snowdrop opens the right one, pushing out its wooden frames; Lilac does the same with the left one, shooting hesitant looks at the other children, then back at the windows. Boris is aware that if he asks Snowdrop to open the left window, and Lilac to open the right one, they won't be able to manage this very simple task, even though they have done it hundreds of times. Their chain of knowledge and habits is interrupted, and kids like them never recover or improve through experience.

The two children head back to their table, pleased with themselves.

"Now, three of you sit on one side of the table and the other three on the other," says Boris. "When I clap my hands, I want each of you to start talking about the sun with the girl across from you! Then, when I clap my hands again, you will stop and everyone will move to the chair on their right!"

He had found this exercise in one of Aunt Leo's textbooks, buried in a pile of old books in the room he shares with Borissa. Psychologists call it the "Mad Hatter Game," after the Alice in Wonderland character who makes his tea party guests speak in pairs and at a certain time asks them to change places so that everyone can talk to everyone.

("What do you mean I have to learn to live without Borissa?!...")

The thought refuses to leave his mind, making him more and more anxious with its ambiguity.

Calla is a small bowlegged girl with a red dress, a prominent forehead and no expression whatsoever. Boris sees her as the twin of Wendy Adams from the Adams Family. Calla never talks to anyone but her doll. She is now refusing to sit with the others, her eyes glued to the floor, her body slowly rocking back and forth.

Boris walks up to her, preparing to do something he discovered only a few weeks ago. He realized then that if he speaks not to her, but to her doll Villi (the name is embroidered with an orange thread on the back of the doll), Calla begins to do everything she is told and sometimes even responds on behalf of her doll.

"Villi, tell Calla to sit on that chair." No reaction. As Boris patiently begins repeating his words, the doll, made out of just colored ropes and red cushions, "looks" at him.

"Okay, I'll tell her and she'll do it! Be-cau-se..." Here the doll's "voice" becomes squeaky and playful. "she is a good, good, good girl!"

"Good job, Villi!"

Calla is still staring at the floor, her right hand holding the doll, moving her in rhythm with the words as they are being pronounced. She looks like a ventriloquist who can't keep his lips still.

"Tell her to hurry up because the other girls are waiting."

Villi "taps" Calla on the shoulder and they "whisper" to each other a bit. Shortly thereafter, Calla sits on the chair and obediently looks at the girl in front of her. Boris knows she will not say a word, but he is pleased nonetheless. He has found a way to reach her, and for now it is enough.

As the children sit around the table, he claps his hands and they begin their conversations. First to talk, as usual, is the beautiful Jasmine. Her name was a

given because of her blond hair, which goes almost white around her ears in the summertime. She talks fast, her words sound almost like incoherent rambling:

“...the sun is yellow, it’s yellow, it’s hot, it’s round, it moves slooowly through the sky, it reflects on glass, glass cuts, makes you bleed, children are afraid, we are afraid, we are not fear...” she tries to continue but something takes her words away, her thoughts are no more, there is nothing. And when she quiets down, somehow overwhelmed by her own inability to continue, the other girls start talking over each other, with only two of them sticking to the sun theme, and doing so with great effort.

After a while, Boris claps his hands again and the conversations stop. So much for the sun. Jasmine guiltily peers at him with her clear, green eyes, as if she’s done something naughty. Across from her, Lilac spastically raises her hand to her lips to bite her nails but her mouth widens in disgust and she gives up. For the last few months Boris has been painting her nails with some bitter red nail polish which Aunt Leo found somewhere, which makes Lilac look older and more put together than the other kids, but also slowly teaches her to quit her bad habit.

“Now, everyone move to the seat to your right, and when I clap my hands, start talking about the moon with the girl across from you.” The term “right” is complicated and confusing for them, but Boris has long ago tied a thick red string on their right hands and adds: “Go to the chair next to your hand with the red string.”

The girls move around and slowly begin doing what he tells them to. Margarita, who is sitting in one of the corner chairs, is the smartest out of all six kids, and goes around the table and sits on the chair that was across from her. She is the only one in the “structuring phase,” according to Aunt Leo’s classification, the only “thinking doll” according to the classification of Boris. Snowdrop sits firmly on her chair, looking at the red string tied to her fragile pale hand, then at the empty space beside her. Boris knows he’ll lose too much time explaining to her what to do, so he gently picks her up and helps her reach the opposite chair. He leans over her and quietly asks, for encouragement:

“Tell me, Snowdrop, what is five plus five?”

This is their secret game, the two of theirs, and Snowdrop knows that it is only for her, for no one else in the group, no one else. Boris told her how good she is in math, the best out of everyone, and she always smiles when he makes her add. Her confusion over not finding a chair to her right quickly dissipates and is replaced by a warm pleasure, spilling all over her face as if it were milk. She turns to Boris and whispers her answer:

“Three.”

“Yes, dear, three! You’re getting better!” he pats her lightly on her back to encourage her further.

Then he claps and the girls start talking about the moon, over each other.

(“*What do you mean I have to learn to live without Borissa...?!*”)

He lowers his head, trying to remember all the short conversations with Aunt Leo the previous night. Images of morning sex with her scatter in his memory like faded pictures thrown against the wind and he sees her, as if she were here, lying beneath him, giving him her large naked body, with indifference radiating from her pale skin. All around him there’s only skin, a field of skin, (“The Lord should have made women bigger and men smaller, that would be a better fit ...”), then her frozen yellowish-brown gaze, coldly studying him, finally the familiar grip of her thighs, as she sometimes does, gripping him so tightly he loses his breath. Her soft moaning then fades into a hissing sound, not a passionate one, but something that more resembles pain springing from her very depths. Her face gets distorted, her cheekbones swell up, the veins on her neck fan out and an invisible knife pierces her abdomen, making her fold in two, as if that pain feeling has suddenly become too much.

(“... *And somewhere in all this, she does not give in to her orgasm, but at the last moment takes a step back and refuses the pleasure. And thus, she deprives herself of that which she wants the most, so that she can thrive, winning yet again the battle against her crippled body which despises the day she lost her hand...*”)

This insight captivates him like a sparkling net that became entangled in his perceptions. He puts his hand on his chest to calm down and accepts the disturbing truth which he has just touched upon as if by accident, even though he didn’t get the answer he was looking for. This is something new to him, something that years from now will lead him to other feelings and others insights and will doom him to look at human souls in a different way. “Hey, Boris! Will you not pay any attention to us at all?” he hears the raspy voice of Mr. Gray behind him, a voice infused with an ironic cry for help.

Boris glances at the elders’ table, noticing that, as always, Mrs. Leadgray is the center of everyone’s attention. Mrs. Leadgray is a big woman with manly shoulders and big bony hands that seem to have only kneaded bread and cared for chickens their whole lives. She is in her element, and the boredom on the faces of her audience seems almost cartoonish.

As he walks over to them, he is disturbed to recall that he has caused death in this group of old men and women. The brief reassurance he

had gotten from his insight about Aunt Leo dissipates without residue. He sits down on the bench next to Mr. Gray, who is the oldest person in the boarding house and the closest one to him, out of all the residents.

“You seem sad today, Bobby,” says Mrs. Leadgray, her voice sounding raspy from all the talking. Her large yellowish-gray face hangs like a gloomy moon above all the residents around the table.

“Hello, princess, why the long face?” says Mr. Maroon, as his cheeks cracked with the capillaries that brought him his nickname stretch out his crooked smile.

He began harassing Boris from the moment he came two years ago, because he occasionally wore girl’s clothes. However, his attitude suits Boris, as he doesn’t want anyone in this group to like him.

“I’m not feeling well,” Boris says quietly, bowing his head. This is a psychological trick he learned from Aunt Leo: to pretend to be helpless and make these useless old people try to help him so that they feel like they matter again. Mockery is also on the menu.

“Why don’t you put on a new dress, Madame Butterfly?” Mr. Maroon’s eyes are full of sweetened malice and unconcerned delight. That annoying Mrs. Leadgray is no longer the center of attention, now he is. “Put on a bra and some make up, while you’re at it!” He raises his head with crude pride and continues breathlessly, “I think you’ll be a true beauty with some braids! That blond hair of yours is a godsend! Maybe even with some ribbons, pink ones with white polka-dots!”

“What’s the matter, youngster?” Mrs. Leadgray’s sister, who has no other name because of her overly powerful and sociable sister, glares at him over her knitting. Her absurd raspberry lipstick and dark gray hair seem to swim in the air not unlike mismatched colorful plaques on a poster.

“Nothing’s the matter,” Boris says, continuing with his performance: “Two of the canaries I bought for breeding died yesterday. It was terrible...”

The thing about the canaries was true, but their death did not happen yesterday, but a week ago. In one of his endless streams of sleepless nights, Boris got out of bed and walked over to see his birds, trembling. In the aviary he captured the two “chrysanthemums,” canaries that seem to be made of plush and silk, and began to caress them to calm down. But instead of calming down, he became filled with an unexpected rage and before he knew it, his fingers crumpled the poor birds’ bodies like a couple of boiled potatoes.

“You’ll raise others,” says Mrs. Leadgray’s sister.

“These ones were special.”

Mr. Gray sets his false teeth with his tongue so he can say something, but, unable to find the words, gives up. His shoulders sink and his thin, stiff neck

sinks down the lapel of his worn-out suit like a turtle holding its head in its shell. Next to him Mr. Gold, with his shimmering brass medals on his threadbare shirt, has spread out on the table in front of him the pieces of pyrite that usually occupy his pockets, admiring them all bright eyed. He is the only one in the group who can be qualified as crazy, and all he does is stare at those bits of glittering mineral, otherwise known as “fool’s gold.”

“Well, you’ve got so many more of those flying things,” says Mr. Maroon grimly, appearing more tame after he was able to spread his diluted poison.

Boris lets out a quiet sigh, without raising his head. His sadness is very well played, especially since what he is thinking is that Mr. Maroon will probably be the next one on death’s doorstep. He has learned to spot the signs: the “last dance make up” is evident, the dark insides of his mouth are there, the darkened eyes, broken capillaries on his face, the bags under his eyes becoming the color of an overripe medlar. Boris can sense that, despite his bravado, Mr. Maroon is barely hanging on, he looks so tired even though he got up not even an hour ago.

(“He should have been the one with the big inheritance, not Mrs. Caramel. Then everything would have fallen into place without me...”)

Mrs. Leadgray raises her hands vigorously.

“Boris, don’t be sad! There are many things to...”



Palmi RANCHEV

was born in Sofia in 1950. He has been a boxer, a newspaper director, a journalist, a screenwriter. He once owned a coffee shop and a gambling house and even had his own TV show on the Military TV channel. Ranchev says he could list as many other occupations which once allowed him to make a living. He admits that he's most experienced in loafing in the streets. And that was where he wrote his first book. And some of the rest.

After the fall of Communism in 1989, only a handful of Bulgarian writers took hidden manuscripts out of their secret drawers. And no one noticed that in the drawers, figuratively speaking, there were writers, Ranchev says. He defines himself as one of these writers: "a writer in a drawer" and admits that for various reasons, writing was an illegal occupation of his for a very long time.

Ranchev received a national award for his first book *Manhattan – Almost an Event*. In fact, nearly all of his books have received or at least been nominated for some literary prize. He has been presented with the Bank Austria Literaris Award (Austria) for his collection of stories *Some Luck for a Little Bit Later*.

His poetry collections include *The Hat of the Wanderer*, *Rag Flag*, *Hotel Room*, *Midnight Man: a Biography*, *A Lover of Lonely Streets and Desolate Houses*, *What Blue: Visible and Hidden*, and *Everything at Close Range*. Ranchev's prose works include the novels *Direction Sacramento*, *Anonymous Snipers* and *Biblical Graffiti*, as well as several short story collections: *Boxers and Passers-by*, *Tonight Nothing Happens by Chance*, *Street Games*, *Sunday*

Lunch, Amateurs, and Professionals and Other Participants.

His radio play *I Can't See You* has been broadcast by the Bulgarian National Radio.

Ranchev has taken part in four films of various length as a screenwriter and an actor.

TONIGHT NOTHING HAPPENS BY CHANCE

Synopsis

There are thirty-five short stories in *Tonight Nothing Happens By Chance*, Palmi Ranchev's latest book – an impressive amount for a volume which at no point claims to be a retrospective or collection of his best stories. Still, the book doesn't leave the reader with the impression that the stories in it have ended up together mechanically or by chance. On the contrary, with story after story the feeling of a common world grows stronger and the signs that the reading should not remain on the surface increase.

What do readers see at first glance, on that "surface" mentioned in some of the stories? They see familiar characters who have been exploited (often as an end in itself) by Bulgarian literature in the last three decades, characters that have been torn away from "normal" life, characters who have been violently cut off from "the truth" and pushed far away from the universally recognised perception of what it means to be "human." It is no accident, of course, that these three words are put in quotation marks: Palmi Ranchev's stories demonstrate how words as important as these aren't so much devoid of meaning but have distanced themselves from it and moved closer to something else. The world built after that shift (which has political, ethical and purely aesthetic dimensions) is not a world for everyone to share. And it is namely those who have fallen out of it – no matter whether they realise their situation or not – are

those whom Ranchev the storyteller is looking for. Most of them occupy the periphery: tramps and beggars, criminals and prostitutes; there are also characters who are literary beyond the periphery – immigrants and travellers; there is a third group, too, who are in the very center of “the normal” – the journalist from the first story, for example. In their thoughts and conversations they often reach what has become “the usual monologue of the recent years and the years before” about how something has happened, something has gone, something has broken.

Vladimir Poleganov,
literary critic and writer, on *Tonight Nothing Happens by Chance*



MELANCHOLY FRIENDS

Excerpt / Translated by Irina Ivanova

Dawn hadn't yet broken in the room. Only the sky, now seen hanging low through the shattered skylight, was bright; a blue rectangle with a handful of spiky lights along its sides. He closed his eyes and opened them again almost immediately. It was nicer looking upwards. He wished that everything could go on for a little longer. That the sky would continue to be that blue together with the two spiky lights hanging a hand span away from each other. Their rays were crossing.

"Blues, are you awake yet? Answer me – the Old Bone's asking you a question!"

"I'm still sleeping. And I don't have the least intention of getting out of the sack any time soon."

"Aha, so you're awake."

"I'm not, I told you already."

"Get up! Don't you remember the Old Bone's plan that we talked about last night?"

"No. I don't remember anything about it. And I don't want to recall even a single word from any plan whatsoever."

"So my explaining all those things to you was in vain?"

The Blues tried to focus on the rectangle of the skylight again. But some changes had occurred there, too. The blue had become lighter and the two spiky lights were no longer in its upper corner. Not even a ray could be seen now. They had disappeared without trace. And the sky had pulled back as well.

"Get up, we have work to do, the Old Bone says! Yesterday the Old Bone explained to you that only if we try hard, will we stay on the surface."

"That's exactly what I am doing and without any effort. I don't need God knows what. It's enough that I woke up in the morning to see another day. All I need is some music. I would like to hear Memphis Slim in my ears, if possible. I don't want anything else."

"That's too bad, the Old Bone thinks. Your attitude to life is deplorable – criminal, even. You should always have sufficient desires and ambitions. Never mind the situation that you... To call yourself... To be called... And so on and so forth, the Old Bone says."

“I don’t want to call myself anything, nor be called anything by other people, no matter what. Not in the least. I don’t need that. I have no demands and no goals. You know my favourite line of poetry, right? *Let there never be anything, so there will be nothing to lose!*”¹

“Sounds beautiful, the Old Bone says. Sad and beautiful. But it won’t do the job.”

“I don’t have any job to do. That’s why I became a tramp. I got tired of being someone’s servant. Do this, do that. Every time I take something up, no matter what grand intentions I might have, this formula repeats itself. I don’t want to be part of it anymore.”

“Aren’t you up yet, the Old Bone asks?”

“I still haven’t woken up.”

It had been a month and a half since he began sharing the attic with the Bone, who slept in his clothes and who, after having put on his raincoat, was ready to go out. The Bone came nearer to his mattress and frowned at him. His face looked like a green plum. Not completely shaped and yet picked off the tree a long time ago and therefore wrinkled now. The Blues made some movements under the blankets to gather speed for more decisive actions; he sat up and rubbed his eyes with his forefingers.

“Last night, if you remember, the Old Bone suggested we followed an exercise routine every morning.”

“You’ve gotten dressed already.”

“Never mind the clothes. Now that we have decided to stay on the surface, let’s try to be like the others in some ways at least.”

“Exercise!... No way!... I need music... Blues... Memphis Slim, Ray Charles, Billie Holiday, John Lee Hooker, B. B. King... It doesn’t matter whose voice I hear. They are all friends of mine. And I love them. I want to do exercise to slow blues songs. That’s my wish, if you want to know.”

“You’re fucking with the Old Bone. You can’t do exercises to blues songs.”

“Oh, yes, I can. I can even imagine the exercises. But I won’t be alone. No way. And you will have to clear off, that’s another prerequisite. In place of you, there will be a girl. What better exercise than dancing to a blues song with a beautiful girl? Even if she isn’t exactly a perfect beauty but somewhat ordinary, I won’t be too picky. All that matters is that we’ll be together. Our arms and legs will be entwined in such a way – they will be so incredibly close to each other – that you won’t be able to tell which parts of that joint body belong to her and

¹ A quote from the poem “Pathway” by Bulgarian poet Penyo Penev (1930-1959).

which – to me. We’ll dance. Because everything turns into a dance when you’re not alone. Do you get what I mean?”

“Cut it out, the Old Bone says. And get up! I will show you how to do proper exercises. Otherwise the Old Bone will get angry.”

The Blues rubbed his eyes again with his forefingers bent. He blinked and set about getting up, still wrapped in blankets. He had sensed some threat in the Bone’s voice. He didn’t want to bicker with him so early in the morning. He wanted to remind him that he didn’t like to be bossed about. Nor to be told how to live. By anyone. Be it managers, kings, presidents, ministers or whatever they believed themselves to be. Those guys got his hackles up in seconds. Especially when he was just relishing the slowest blues song of all. And when he was picturing a morning exercise dance with a beautiful girl. He had no intention of doing anything else apart from that. What exercise was the Bone babbling about? He wasn’t that crazy. He got up, gave a slight hoarse cough and snarled.

“Raise your arms, the Old Bone says. It’s important to begin from somewhere. Beginnings are always hard, but you’re lost without them.”

“I want to be a regular bum. Can’t you see? Indifferent, tired, with no desires. And I don’t want to see anything of the so-called world around us. I don’t give a damn about the world around us. Otherwise I can’t hear the voice of Memphis Slim in my head.”

“We made a deal last night, the Old Bone would like to remind you. You must be eager to work. Work, work and work again. And be optimistic about the day ahead. This is the only way you stand a chance of floating to the surface, the Old Bone believes.”

Somehow, without meaning to, he had started copying the motions with his arms. Instead of Memphis Slim or one of his other melancholy friends, as he liked to call them, he could hear a military bugle. He wanted to share how offensive this seemed to him at that precise moment. But that would hardly impress the Bone. He went on repeating the movements, every time more slowly and without completing the range of the motion. He tried to squat with his arms extended in front of his chest. His knees creaked, his brow furrowed, and with great difficulty he managed to keep his balance.

“I can’t go on, Bone.”

“You don’t have to. The exercise is over. And we must not forget our goal.”

“I don’t want...”

“What don’t you want?”

“In fact I do want something. I want someone to carry me to the garden in front of Sveti Sedmochislenitsi Church. I will bask in the sun the whole morning. And I will listen to my music.”

“There will be no sun today, the Old Bone is certain about that.”

“How do you know?”

“If the Old Bone says so, it means there’ll be no sun. And we will have considerably more time for work.”

“What work, Bone? We are ordinary tramps.”

“We are not. We are full of optimism and a desire to succeed.”

“What kind of success is it to collect cardboard boxes all day?”

“We’ll have money in the evening. If we earn and put some money aside every day, eventually we’ll raise a sum that’s big enough to start something more serious.”

“I prefer to find what I need. Lots of money. Or jewels. A precious diamond for example. Or some other treasure.”

“That’s nonsense, the Old Bone reckons. Name one tramp who has found lots of money in the garbage. Money is in the banks. There’s mainly garbage in the garbage.”

“I will find something, you’ll see. I won’t spend the whole day scavenging the rubbish for a measly couple of leva. Doing it for a lot of money – now that’s something else. Or for jewels. After that I won’t do anything else. My days will follow one after the other like slow, really slow blues songs.”

“We’re going out, the Old Bone says. And we’ll see who will have more success. The Old Bone who’s working hard or you and your childish dreams of good fortune.”

They left the attic and the Bone hurried ahead down the stairs. The Blues was trudging behind him but planted one of his feet awkwardly and stumbled. He managed to remain on his feet and looked over his shoulder to see why this had happened.

“Be careful, the Old Bone is warning you! Enough with these blues songs. You will crack your head open before you find those great riches.”

They continued down the stairs taking smaller steps. They often moved sideways trying to stay away from the spots strewn with sand and fallen plaster. They reached the two flats which had metal doors with bars on them. Each door had three locks. They always passed more quickly by these doors. They weren’t sure who lived inside. Or if anyone lived there at all. In order to check, they would have to use a crowbar at the very least, according to the Bone. Some ten

days ago it sounded like a suggestion. He probably expected his friend would back him. In place of an answer the Blues had drawn two hieroglyphs with his long fingers. In that way he had expressed his unwillingness to take part in such ventures. Since then all they did was pass quickly by the closed doors. In that way the risk of bumping into someone who would ask them nasty questions was smaller. Who they were, why they were there and so on. They went out into the street and went on their way without turning back. They didn’t want to be linked to the four-storey house. They’d rather look like casual passersby.

“I want to return to the attic,” grumbled the Blues and then went on in his normal voice, “and to go back to sleep. I will dream that I’m sitting by a broad river. Crooning something really slow and drawn out, with only two or three notes. Here I am, I can hear myself singing without opening my mouth even. But what should I do so that you can hear me, too, Bone? It would be nice to share the pleasure with you. It would be easier if one my melancholy friends were singing. You know, I have a hard time hitting the high notes. Imagine that you can hear what I hear. And your soul cringes. No, it calms down. You won’t be the same man, that’s for sure.”

“You haven’t woken up yet, the Old Bone thinks. That’s why you’re daydreaming. You will come to your senses soon.”

“No, I won’t. I don’t want to. I don’t know how to say this more clearly.”

“How will you find money and jewels then, the Old Bone’s asking?”

“I have no desire to find anything whatsoever.”

“Only a minute ago that was what you wanted.”

“So what? I’ve changed my mind.”

The Blues gave a little sigh and kept trudging along behind him. He had begun walking with a limp some time ago, he was dragging his sneaker sideways, raising the dust.



Chavdar TSENOV

was born on March 24, 1956, in Sofia. He graduated from the 9th French Language School Alphonse de Lamartine and has a degree in Bulgarian Studies from Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. He is an editor at Klett Bulgaria.

He has worked as a teacher of Bulgarian language and literature, as an editor in *Literary Forum* newspaper, as a proofreader and reporter for daily newspapers. Tsenov has also worked at the National Institute for Monuments of Culture and at Lodos Publishing House. He has been head of an administrative department and director of a directory, as well as a coordinator for Comprehensible Bulgaria — a joint project on the spelling of Bulgarian proper names with Latin letters between the Ministry of Public Administration and the Institute for Bulgarian Language at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The project led to the adoption of the *Transliteration Law* by the National Assembly.

Tsenov 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*. He has written feuilletons for *Sega Daily* and has numerous publications in the press. Chavdar Tsenov is author of the composition *The Drowned Fish*, the short story collections *Dirt under the Nails*, *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 the collection of novellas *Deviations in Autumn*, which was nominated for the Elias Canetti Award,

the Peroto Award, the Helikon Award and for which Tsenov received the Hristo G. Danov Award for 2015 and the Portal Kultura Award.

His latest novel, *Where the River Flows*, was published at the end of 2018.

Short stories by Tsenov have been translated into Hungarian, German, Spanish and Macedonian.

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WHERE THE RIVER FLOWS

A novel

Synopsis

All his life former geography teacher Mihail Iliev has dreamt of traveling the world but has never set foot abroad. His friend Kosta, a historian, longs to buy his own flat but eventually ends up on the streets. Professor Dimitar Lipov owns thousands of books but never manages to write a book himself. The novel tells of these three comparable biographical deficiencies. The story is narrated by Mihail in three different modes: at times he talks about himself in the first person then switches to the third person, while the story of Kosta is told as if it has been heard from someone else.

From the imaginary dialogue between Mihail and the prominent Polish journalist and writer Richard Kapuściński, through the narrator's mother's last days and his budding friendship with Kosta, who turns out to be a mirror image of himself, to a love story with Lisa, the professor's daughter, the novel leads us through the longings and the dreams of the main character, unravelling his memories and at the same time telling the saga of Kosta's real estate woes: from his failed marriage, which includes a short stay in a fabulous flat through the sale of his own parents' tiny apartment, and his life in that very same apartment first as a lover and then as a husband of the new owner, to his ending up on the streets. The rekindled love story between the narrator and Lisa after a long separation not only gives him a thrill, a powerful surge of energy and excitement, but it also surprises him after turning into a source of quick but bright impressions from various parts of the world.

Mihail's intimate relationship with Lisa brings on the denouement: after describing Professor Lipov's great library and realizing that books, when you demonstrate the right attitude towards them, can buzz just like an enchanting multilingual choir, Mihail crosses Bulgaria's borders (leaving the impression he has been coerced into doing so) and "lands" in Brussels. There he meets people from Estonia, Peru and Burkina Faso and starts believing that the Earth is their common home.

The novel ends with a love letter to Lisa in which Mihail, carried away by the power of his feelings for her, makes plans for future travels and reveals that he feels "unbearably good" as part of the world and believes that the river flows this way – that is to say, towards them.



WHEELING AND DEALING WITH LEADERS

Excerpt / Translated by Irina Ivanova

The customers at the next table were discussing the shape of the Earth. It was flat, that had been known since time immemorial, but some twenty of the richest families in the world were hiding that fact in order to manipulate people around the world. All the evidence kids had been studying since primary school was a complete delusion. Why people could be manipulated with a round Earth but not with a flat one wasn't made clear. Yet the youngsters were talking with conviction in a tone that tolerated no objection. They were discussing the subject as if it were self-explanatory that the Earth was flat. Still, they provided evidence. Why, one of them butted in, when you go down to Antarctica, why do you run into three rows of soldiers armed to the teeth? What are they there for, if not to hide the truth?

Thank goodness I wasn't soaked enough to undertake any revolutionary actions in defense of geography, otherwise I would have undoubtedly butted in, thus starting a row. And since I was a diehard supporter of the Universe's attributes, among which the oval-shaped Earth took center stage, just like the globe in our living room, I would have been beaten up for sure.

I'd better stop listening to this crap, I thought, they will only get on my nerves. I focused my eyes on one of the youngsters. He seemed to be the boyfriend of the swarthy girl sitting next to him; from time to time he grabbed her and planted some fearsome crackers (smackers, that is) on her lips; also he didn't look as if he shared their views (you could somehow feel it), but was careful enough not to annoy them. He said something only very rarely so as not to be left out in the cold but you got the feeling that all this wasn't exactly to his liking. Whether he was jealous or trying to behave for fear that his girlfriend – who, so it seemed, also believed the Earth was flat – might elbow him, I didn't have time to find out: the third pint washed me away. When I came back with the fourth beer, I could no longer follow the full conversation but was happy enough to listen to the opening lines: look, to tell the truth, honestly, I mean, to tell the truth one more time, I don't know, but to be honest...

I also *don't know* if you have noticed how many people when in conversation always start their lines the same way. Some do it unintentionally, others – to attract attention, and there's another group who simply aren't good at talking and clutch onto stock phrases they have heard from *someone in a certain position*: thus they give themselves courage, they want to be up to the mark.

Back in the day I used to have an uncle from an old socialist nomenclature family. He was short and kind of dumpy. When he wanted to say something, he always started with the same deep guttural: "Now listen here." It was followed by a well-calculated (or more likely a purely intuitive) pause and, indeed, everyone present flinched, shut up and started to listen. No matter what corny thing he said, his words were heavy and impressive. Well, it goes without saying that it helps when the habit of starting with "Now listen here" is accompanied by *some position*. Then it really has an effect. My uncle occupied such a position in the foreign affairs ministry; the very fact that he occupied such a position gave him the indisputable right to start every sentence with "Now listen here." My uncle began deeply and gutturally, blathering on in a tone that was more suitable to a great thinker who had just discovered the curve of dependency between intonation and words. We all listened to him carefully. But did we remember anything of what he said? I personally can't recall a single word, although I

listened to him many an evening for years. He must have said something after all, something clever, in passing, well, not clever but interesting at least, something worth remembering. Maybe he did, but I don't remember it, only his "Now listen here" is still ringing in my head...

My uncle called upon us to listen to him, while many others began their sentences with that old friend "To tell you the truth..." Have you noticed how many people are telling the truth? In a way they defend truth's interests better than Churchill when he had to defend Britain's interests. "To tell you the truth," someone would sigh, "I didn't sleep a wink last night." Listening to these people, you would think they regard truth's interests as supreme. "To tell you the truth," someone else would say, "I lied at the time." You can't understand whether that someone lied at the time to defend truth's interests or if they, to tell you the truth, have just now found out about that lie. Or both statements are true, because the interests of truth are ubiquitous and know no boundaries.

There are other people as well, perhaps more sensitive than the rest, who usually crumple at the end of their statements and then quickly mumble something like "anyway, it doesn't matter." They start with telling the truth and in the end it turns out that it doesn't matter.

There is one more group who end with "it doesn't matter" after starting at times with "to tell you the truth" and with "right" at others. It turned out the guy I had arranged to meet that night at Orange belonged to the latter group. While I was listening to the rich young voices, outwitting each other in the name of truth, a wily-looking gentleman in a bowler holding three beers appeared in front of me. He took off his hat, put it right next to him on the bench in the booth and took the first bottle. Only he didn't raise it or take a drink from it – instead he somehow planted his lips on the neck of the bottle and sucked hard. There was a loud slurping sound, something went plop, the gentleman smacked his lips contentedly and this time he did raise the beer to his mouth. Then he put it down and turned to me.

"Iliev, right? Glad to meet you, my name is Taratanov," he rose to his feet, held out his hand and while I took it and shook it, his eyes pierced me no more than a foot away.

Whether he did it on purpose or not, I couldn't tell, but his gaze was shrewd and deep; it pinned you down in a second and entered you somewhere into its own charts.

Taratanov sat down again and justified the difference in the number of the beers and himself: "I can't go upstairs for another beer every time, right?"

“Glad to meet you, too, I am Mihail Iliev,” I rose from my seat, told him my name and took even myself by surprise when I showcased my brilliance in its entirety. “The Great Geographical Discoveries have changed history. Can you think of a historical event which has changed geography?”

Taratanov’s eyes opened wide. I was too fired up, I had to slow down a bit, so I shut up and returned to my seat. Taratanov quickly narrowed his gaze and went back to his initial intentions. Such was the comradely warmth pouring from his eyes that I thought we might have served in the military together. He swigged at his beer for a while, then lit a cigarette, raised the bottle, took a sip... and tried to drown me in his stories. I remembered one of them well although it, too, was accompanied by endless “right”-s and “it doesn’t matter”-s which were distracting me.

“Hey, man, you remember the summer of ’68, right?” Taratanov began without asking my opinion on whether people who had just met should use more formal forms of address. “Sofia was hosting the World Youth Festival. There were whites, blacks, yellows, all kinds of people. Guitars, and that sort of thing, anyway, it doesn’t matter. I was working at the city committee of the Komsomol at the time and that was how I came to be working on the festival program. Once, while I was escorting someone around the city, I found myself in front of the mausoleum. Right there, just like that, something of a badge market had popped up. Now, man, to get what I’m talkin’ about, you need to know that badges were all the rage at the time. But to tell you the truth here they were hard to come by. Some factories here and there were making badges out of duty, but there was no enthusiasm and no materials. So the Bulgarian badges were dull, good for nothing. Sheer amateurish scraps of tins.

“While the foreigners’ badges were colorful and had the most unusual forms and sizes. The Hungarians, for instance, boasted a collection of seven badges: the KISZ¹ series popular at the time. The Vietnamese were the most troubled nation on Earth – they were at the height of the American war – but even they had a big beautiful brightly colored plate. It was highly sought after. Worthy of envy, indeed! And our badges: goodness gracious me! Factory-made, but it looked as if my grandpa had cut a figure out of a jar lid with his big pinking shears and somehow managed with a file, a hammer and a vice to turn it into a badge. What the fuck! Anyway, it doesn’t matter... At that time I was no collector at all. But at least the market woke up the entrepreneur in me... I looked around. Where were we? In

¹ KISZ (Magyar Kommunista Ifjúsági Szövetség) is the abbreviation for the Hungarian Communist Youth League.

front of the mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov, leader and teacher of the Bulgarian people. And what was sold on the ground floor of TZUM, the Central Department Store? Badges bearing the face of Georgi Dimitrov, leader and teacher of the Bulgarian people. With a moderately drab background, in a moderately lopsided oval shape and with something like a pin for fastening on the badge. It couldn’t have been crappier than that. But I bought five, paying ten stotinki apiece, to see if they would sell and I went back. I would never have thought the leader would be that popular among the brotherly peoples of Latin America, Africa and Vietnam. Call it what you want – drab, lopsided and what not – but in less than ten minutes I sold out my trial lot. I exchanged the Dimitrov badges, all five of them, for other badges, each one fancier than the next. I went back to TZUM and this time I didn’t pinch pennies – I laid out five leva and went back to the market. After a few hours I had gathered nearly all of the most popular badges from the festival. The TZUM operation was then repeated three times in all. I have never done a more lucrative deal. In exchange for drab lopsided tin, I got a three-dimensional Eiffel tower, in exchange for another copy of the very same drab lopsided tin – the beautiful colorful plate from the brotherly people of Vietnam.

“When I went back home that evening, it was as if I had brought the world along with me. Never before had my son seen so many colors. He couldn’t have seen them in a toy shop, right? In those years no shop was as dirty or as dusty as the toy shop. After you went around it a few times, you started thinking: ‘It looks as if we don’t love our children very much!’ It was easy to say we loved them, right? We couldn’t stop repeating how much we loved them, while at the same time we were churning out uglier and uglier kids’ clothes. Anyway, it doesn’t matter...

“In a few days I was summoned to a certain private place. At the time there was a difference between *a private place* and *the private place*, or *the privy*. You got summoned to a certain *private place* but you went to *the private place* of your own accord. *A private place* could mean the police, the party committee, the comrades’ court – in short, it was an important and secretive service (it was obligatorily secretive, if not the service itself, then its missions had to be secretive, the instructions were given from the higher-ups, the higher the higher-ups, the more obligatory the instructions), where you never got summoned for anything good, but to give explanations for your words and deeds, for your thoughts and feelings, for yourself, for your father and for your neighbors. While *the private place* was the toilet, the WC, the loo, the shitter, the facilities. What else could you call the crapper? Back in the day the people living in the country used to say they were ‘going outside.’ To tell you the truth, I think that one needs no explanation...

“So when they summoned me to a certain *private place*, they started yelling at me and raised an awful ruckus, a real hullabaloo: how dare I exchange the Leipzig trial hero, leader and teacher of the Bulgarian people, for some Eiffel tower. The next day I would swap Sofia for Paris. I’d better clear off otherwise they would clear me off. And they did. Thank God, they cleared me off the Komsomol only – there was a real possibility of them clearing me off Sofia as well and sending me somewhere else, and not to Paris in any event.

“But I had become a new person with newly found self-esteem, who had discovered his own niche in the market, so to say. So I wasn’t too shaken. It was namely that new-found self-esteem of an entrepreneur that saved me. In a little workshop in the town of Negovan I produced my first plaster, plastic and even cardboard leaders. I started selling all kinds of Marxes and Engelses, Lenins and Stalins. And I must admit they were selling really well. That’s a fact!

“In 1970 I had already begun traveling across the country to manufacturing sites, village councils, community centers and the like; I met the people in charge – did they dare, after seeing the rows of leaders, en face, courageous, strict and stern, not buy!? How could they know who had sent me? Everything was shrouded in mystery. And the dignitaries, even the village ones, loved that air of secrecy, loved beating around the bush – the message was: ‘I’m in the know but I won’t say a word, I’m not allowed to.’ Often that secrecy would be their undoing in the end. I would approach one such village dignitary and would offer in secrecy to let him buy some leaders. I would beat around the bush breezily and he would start shaking...

“Business was booming. On the face of it, the country seemed small, but there was no end to it – I didn’t manage to get everywhere before the fall of Communism. And if you think that November 10 got in the way of my business, you could not be more wrong. It didn’t get in my way, on the contrary – after this date the supply of leaders became ubiquitous. It increased indeed, but demand remained strong, especially among foreigners who found the leaders exotic – they would gasp and whoop and... pay!

“How did I manage to survive given the competition? Well, that’s my own business. But it’s a fact – many others went bust, I survived. Today most of the booths selling such wares offer my leaders. I have a favorite booth myself. In one of the corners, just for fun, I have arranged badges in all possible colors, so to speak. There is the KISZ collection, the three dimensional Eiffel tower is somewhere there, as well as the plate of the brotherly people of Vietnam. These are not for sale, though. These are souvenirs.

“While the leaders mean nothing to me. And yet, to tell the truth, thanks to Georgi Dimitrov, call him the Leipzig trial hero or Gosho the Tippler, if you want, I don’t give a damn, but it’s a fact that thanks to him and to Comrades Lenin and Stalin that I amassed my initial capital. And thanks to that turbulent year of 1968 I found my own niche in the market – dealings with leaders – and after the fall of socialism, with a range of goods related to the regime. No one suspected how great the demand would be for all kinds of hammers and sickles – made of tin, painted with watercolors, embroidered with silk threads, knit in the wheat ear pattern...

“If it wasn’t for that business with socialist merchandise, I would have spent the first half of my life at the Komsomol where the only pleasant thing apart from eating and drinking were the Komsomol girls but only until the moment they opened their mouths to say something. Which means that if I had stayed at the Komsomol, I wouldn’t have found my new self in the wheeling and dealing with leaders.

“As far as the second part of my life is concerned, who knows what would have been waiting for me there – perhaps a series of humiliations and failures – hey, you, yes, the one from the Komsomol; or perhaps I would have become rich in a fast and inexplicable way; those who stayed in the Komsomol and the police, every single one of them became millionaires.

“Indeed, our prominent leaders – Dimitrov, Lenin and Stalin – failed to make me that rich but, to tell the truth, they turned me into an honest capitalist. After November 10 I had a solid Josip Broz Tito made of bronze and a Stalin made of tin. ‘A Broz of bronze, a Stalin of rattling tin,’ I cried out from time to time to the amusement of those who were eager to shake off the shackles of reality. Anyway, it doesn’t matter...”

We stayed late that night. Taratanov repeated that trick with the beers three times all told. Three plus three and then another three. Well, I never! He was just skin and bones, where did he manage to put them? Nine beers are no joke; eventually he began slurring his words a bit, and his one eye started closing automatically and independently from the other despite his efforts to keep it open.

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