

Contemporary  
Bulgarian  
Writers



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# Contemporary Bulgarian Writers

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*Miroslav Borshosh*

*Dear publishers, readers and future friends of Bulgarian literature,*

It is my pleasure to present to you a catalogue of contemporary Bulgarian prose, containing fifty-five of the most established Bulgarian authors and their most interesting works, as well as twelve young, progressive, recently debuted authors who deserve your attention. This collection represents a cross-section of what is happening in the field of Bulgarian literature at the moment. Without claiming completeness or exhaustiveness, we have tried to present to you a representative sample of the most interesting books and authors over the last five years; this edition lays the foundations for such an annual catalogue to be published by the National Book Center at the National Palace of Culture (NDK), which from now on will include books published within a given literary year. Although over the years attempts have been made in this direction, I believe that for the first time through this catalogue, readers abroad can get a sufficiently full impression of literary life in Bulgaria, of our best authors, and of the exceptionally high level Bulgarian literature has reached in recent years. We fully recognize that our literature is not sufficiently known outside of Bulgaria and it is precisely for this reason that we founded the National Book Center at NDK this year, which, through its Translations Program

supports the translation, publication and popularization of Bulgarian literature abroad in foreign languages. On the Center's website you can find more information about the most interesting and important Bulgarian writers, as well as information about the translators you could turn to if you would like to publish a Bulgarian author in a given language. In the name of the institution I represent, I would like to assure you that we are doing everything possible to support every single author represented in this catalogue, while also supporting you, their publishers, in order to help Bulgarian literature take its rightful place on the global literary scene.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## AWARDS

2010 Second place in the international contest for the "Apex" award given by the International Association of Convention Centres (AIPC)

2009 Silver award from New European Economy magazine for the best congress centre

2008 "European award for quality" from the Europe Business Assembly (EBA)

2005 "Apex" award for the "Best convention centre in the world" by AIPC

2003 Second place in the international contest for the "Apex" award for the "Best convention centre in the world" by AIPC

## INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES

2012 World Health Organization (WHO): World meeting of the regional commission of WHO for Europe

2012 UNESCO: Conference of Ministers of Culture for South East Europe

2009 Fifth International Congress on Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy Sources in South East Europe;

2009 Meeting of the chairpersons of the Economic and Social Councils of the Member States of the European Union;

2007 Annual Economic Forum of the countries from the Central European Initiative

2006 Twelfth meeting of foreign ministers of the countries of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

**THE NATIONAL BOOK CENTER** was founded in the beginning of 2015 under the auspices of the National Palace of Culture. The National Book Centre was created to aid Bulgarian literature through translation and popularization abroad. It an heir of sorts to the mission of the former State Book Centre, which was closed. The director of the National Book Centre is Svetlozar Zhelev. The idea is for the centre to interact with state institutions, universities, schools and others, without usurping the functions of the state. Alongside the book centre, an Advisory Board was created, composed of: Alek Popov, Annie Ilkov, Milena Fuchedjieva, Radoslav Parushev, Alexander Shpatov, Jacqueline Wagenstein, Manol Peykov and Teodora Dimova. The National Book Centre in Sofia was established with the help of the Ministry of Culture and is supported by the Bulgarian Book Association.

The National Book Centre's purpose is to support the publishing, distribution and popularization of Bulgarian literature in the country and abroad. The programmes "Bulgarian Book" and "Translations" are designed for Bulgarian and foreign publishers, engaged in the task of positioning Bulgarian literature in its rightful place on the world literary scene. The National Book Centre's programme for supporting Bulgarian literature is open to foreign publishers across the globe for fiction and non-fiction books from contemporary and classic Bulgarian authors, translated from Bulgarian to any other language and to be published as a first edition in the given country. The funding covers up to 80% of the translation cost, after receipt of a correctly filled-out application form and after approval from the council of experts. Grants are to be used solely for the translation costs of the chosen title. Projects will also be assessed for literary quality, as well as on the strength of the publishing project and strategy.

The programme is open permanently and candidates can apply online any time of the year. The results are announced 60 days after submission.

Applications must be submitted by email along with all the requested documents to the following address: [nbc@ndk.bg](mailto:nbc@ndk.bg)

The National Book Centre will publish an annual catalog of the best books by Bulgarian contemporary writers, recommended by the Center. On our webpage [www.ndk.bg](http://www.ndk.bg) you can find information about the most interesting writers, recommendations for translators from the Bulgarian language and other useful information to help foreign publishers find Bulgarian books to translate and publish in their own language.

# Contemporary Bulgarian Writers



## Elena ALEXIEVA

was born in 1975 in Sofia. She majored in International Economic Relations at the University of National and World Economy in Sofia, and continued her studies at New Bulgarian University's Doctoral Program in Semiotics. She holds a Ph.D. in Literature.

Her works have appeared in a number of periodicals and anthologies in English, French, Polish, Spanish, Hungarian, Serbian and Macedonian. In 2010 the short story collection *Who* was published by Nocturna Ediciones in Spain. The novel *Knight, Devil and Death* appeared in Montenegro from the publishing house Oktoih in 2012. Her latest novel *The Nobel Laureate* was published in 2015 by the French Actes Sud.

Elena Alexieva lives in Sofia where she works as a freelance translator, interpreter and writer.

## Bibliography

### Poetry

*Ladder on the Heart* (1994)

*The Face of a Killer Angel* (1996)

### Short Stories

*Readers' Group 31* (2005)

*Who* (2006)

*Pets Syndicated* (2010)

### Novels

*The Blue Stairway* (2001)

*Knight, Devil and Death* (2007)

*She Is Here* (2009)

*The Nobel Laureate* (2011)

### Plays (collections of)

*Angel Fire* (2014)

*Victims of Love* (in press)

### Stage Productions

*The Therapist* (premiered November 2012, National Theatre, Sofia)

*Glass* (premiered April 2013, N.O.Masalitinov Theatre, Plovdiv; February 2015, National Theatre, Sofia)

*Madame Mishima* (premiered November 2014, co-production of ArtSensorium Association and Sofia Theatre, Sofia)

*Phantom Pain* (premiered February 2015, Theatre 199, Sofia)

### Awards

Helikon Prize for Contemporary Bulgarian Fiction, 2006, for *Readers' Group 31*

Asker for New Bulgarian Drama, 2013, for *The Therapist*

Award of the Bulgarian Society of Independent Theatre Critics, 2014, for *Glass*

Ikar for New Bulgarian Drama, 2015, for *Madame Mishima*



## THE NOBEL LAUREATE

### Synopsis

Writer and Nobel laureate Eduardo Ghertelsmann arrives in Sofia at the invitation of his Bulgarian publisher to meet with readers. The event is big and causes quite a stir. Overwhelmed with literary fatigue and the burden of the many years behind him, to Ghertelsmann writing increasingly feels like a compulsion, and the fear of failure is bigger than ever. That same evening he leaves his hotel for a short walk and disappears in the streets of Sofia, never to be seen again.

At the same time inspector Wanda Belovska of the Countering Organized Crime Unit is back to her original workplace after six months in Juvenile Delinquency where she has been relocated as a tacit punishment for having seriously affected the interests of certain influential figures. On top of it all, her private life is far from orderly: she lives on her own in a small apartment with her pet, Henry the iguana, her only true companion. Her father having died long ago, Wanda is in constant conflict with her aged mother.

In the meantime, the midday TV newscast shows a video, made with a cell phone, of several masked terrorists and an identified man who has been kidnapped. The kidnapers claim that he is Eduardo Ghertelsmann and demand a ransom of 2 million euros.

The case is assigned to Belovska, under pressure from the Minister of Interior, to whom she is ordered to report in person. The disappearance of the Nobel laureate may turn into a serious blow on the reputation of the country, notorious for its wide-spread corruption and crime. Political interests are at stake, and if Ghertelsmann is not found alive, it may well mean the fall of the entire government.

## The Nobel Laureate

*Excerpt / Translated by Elena Alexieva*

*The night has many faces.  
Only one of them  
Is mine.*

Inspector Wanda Belovska pressed the 'save' button and the poem, written hastily in Latin characters, sank somewhere in her mobile's memory. It felt still early although she was already off duty. She checked once again the folder she had just closed and carefully placed it in the middle of the desk. The case of the young gypsy beggar run over by a car was clear, but all the talking she did with the others and her efforts to drag them out of the beggar business proved a total failure. It was a public secret that this was a well-organized network where the kids were merely the tip of the iceberg. Knowing how things stood, her superiors preferred not to get too involved. And the agencies responsible for child protection kept referring the young beggars to her. The only thing Inspector Belovska could do was preach to them about the risks of what they were doing. As if they didn't know themselves. The children would stare at her, their eyes sparkling cunningly, fidgeting like little monkeys, nodding in agreement at every word she said. Then they would go back to their workplaces because in a few hours their patrons would come to collect the cash.

Nor did she feel she belonged here. But that was the idea, after all: to make her suffer her punishment in all its severity. And that was exactly what Wanda had been doing over the past six months. From the Organized Crime Task Force she had suddenly found herself in a local juvenile delinquency office substituting for a colleague on sick leave whom Wanda hadn't even met before. She lacked the pedagogical qualifications required by the law. Her superiors had decided that she could take the job simply because she was a woman and supposedly got on well with kids.

But they had been terribly wrong.

She searched for a blank sheet in one drawer, then in another, and as she couldn't find any, she rummaged the waste bin under the desk until she produced a crumpled form, which she tried to straighten a bit before writing on the back. In a note to her unknown colleague she described briefly what she

had done over the past few months and where all the relevant records were. Underneath she added her name and phone number, just in case.

It was her last workday in juvenile delinquency, and Wanda very much hoped that she'd never have to set foot here again.

Officially, the sanction which her bosses had imposed was the most lenient one: reprimand for having exceeded her authority. Inspector Belovska, as well as her colleagues and her superiors themselves, knew perfectly well that she hadn't exceeded anything. She had acted in full compliance with the law, faithfully discharging her official duties. But it seemed that at some point her excessive diligence had affected the interests of individuals whose power and contacts ran high above her where the air was so thin that small people like her were physiologically unfit to breathe it. Wanda was able to pinpoint the exact moment when she had trodden on the toes of those with interests. She also knew the customs officer who, while still under investigation, was miraculously restored to his position and even promoted, and the case was closed and forgotten in no time. In turn, Belovska, too, was symbolically forgotten and left to rot in juvenile delinquency.

The reprimand never came. Instead, on the next day after she was informed of the sanction imposed, she found on her desk a written order for a temporary relocation due to 'severe understaffing.'

Six months proved far too short a time for the humiliation to subside. During the long sleepless nights when the sleeping pills somehow never worked, Wanda would toss and turn in a fitful narcoleptic drowse, the decision to once and for all leave the force taking increasingly clear shape in her mind. Still, she couldn't sleep. And on the following night everything was repeated, and on the one after as well. She couldn't figure out whether it was the decision itself that scared her or the uncertainty looming behind it. She couldn't even find the answer to the far simpler question of whether she loved her job or not. Police work and private life were so much the same for her that no matter what she changed, the sign of equality between the two remained. It all felt infinitely stupid. And Wanda was sometimes ashamed of herself and of her stubbornness in trying to prove that the weakness which constantly oppressed her was, in fact, her greatest strength.



# Kerana ANGELOVA

is a Bulgarian writer whose works appeal to readers anywhere in the world because she deals with universal themes of the human soul: love, pain, time, god, violence, and happiness. What makes her special is the beauty of her words, the subtle transitions between fantasy and reality in her world, and her ability to draw readers in with her relatable characters. Unfortunately, few of her poems exist in English now, and none of her prose is accessible to the English-speaking reader.

Kerana Angelova is the author of four novels. *Elada Pignyo and Time* (2003) is her astounding award-winning debut, a masterpiece of contemporary Bulgarian literature. Three other novels followed—*Inner Room* (2006), *The Street of Butterflies* (2010), and *Sunflowers for Maria* (2013)—along with seven poetry collections, two novellas, and a non-fiction collection of short essays and notes entitled *One After Midnight* (2013).

Kerana was born in the mystical Strandzha Mountains in Southeastern Bulgaria and lives in the seaport city of Burgas. Her stories are imbued with the sense of magic woven into the local lore and language of her home region.

## SUNFLOWERS FOR MARIA

*Synopsis*

*Pegas Award of the city of Burgas*

*Published by ICU, Sofia*

*Design by Nevena Angelova*

*Year of publication: 2013*

Maria is haunted by the memories of her orphaned childhood and is struggling to cope with her recently ruined romantic relationship. She is a photographer in Burgas, Bulgaria. She was the first reporter to shoot a terrorist attack at the airport in her hometown. She smelled death mixed with the bittersweet aroma of autumn sunflowers.

Stephan's life was marked by another terrorist attack—a train was bombed when he was a child. Death and pain. He saw Maria on TV when the news of the airport incident was aired.

Vincent Van Gogh is choked to death by his gloomy and sunless homeland. His genius needs space and sun, light and love. Vincent has a dream named Maria. She lives in the future and is obsessed with sunflowers.

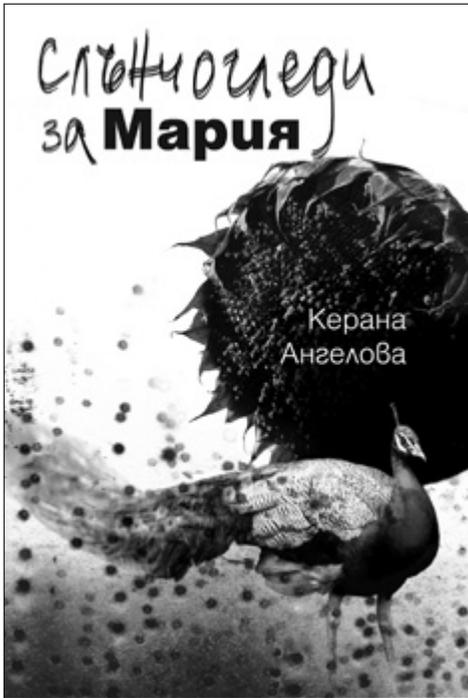
*Sunflowers for Maria* is a book relating the Local with the Global, Genius with Madness, Art with Life. The difference between two cultural eras, the 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, transforms—surprisingly—into similarity if we only dare look at Time from the vantage point of the Creative Spirit.

“She is bold and fragile. Kerana Angelova is a writer inspiring her readers to live their lives more intensely than usual living. Exquisite and dialogical, these stories reconstruct the myth of the Seeker. They manage to touch archetypal layers beyond our conventional understanding of what culture means. For Kerana Angelova does not search horizontally but vertically—in the depths of our human existence, in the depths of the words and in the heights that encourage us to believe that power comes from within.”

*Ina Ivanova, writer*

“Kerana Angelova writes her texts on an aspen leaf. She was the one who taught me that the shadow of a tree is also a tree but the shadow of a man is not a man ... I open up her book in the name of humanity.”

*Krum Filipov, theatre and cinema director*



## Sunflowers for Maria

Excerpt / Translated by Nevena  
Dichlieva-Krysteva

*I consider the loveless life a sinful and  
dissolute state.*

Vincent van Gogh

What was revealed before her eyes couldn't possibly be the same Burgas reality where she had been residing mere minutes ago. The screams of people groping through balls of smoke, grumbling engines of buses trying to maneuver out of the place, police officers wandering through the black fog and struggling to recognize the wounded, shreds of clothing on the burned tarmac... Well, not just clothing, stared Maria and what she saw shocked her—torn human bodies, and limbs. She thought that she noticed a woman's hand with an exquisite little ring with a white quartz under a bloody sheer powder-blue cloth—she had read somewhere that white quartz is a symbol of good luck. For a moment, her sight grew dim. What luck!, she said aloud, terrific luck, girl. While she was trying to unscrew the lens cap, she kept on thinking aloud: it is definitely a wedding ring, these kinds of rings belong on the fourth finger of the right hand, and legend has it that this where the vein of love runs... The vein of love, the vein of love. She was out of her mind. Her hand grabbed the camera swinging on her chest, and she started shooting frantically whatever came her way. Her first impulse was to run away headlong from this ominous place, to enter the nearby sunflower field, to squat among the sunflowers and turn her back to the nightmare. She was almost sure that this was one of her

black dreams, this was how her fingers froze when she shook off the nightmare and realized it with relief.

She threw up by a lonely stray sunflower in the neighboring little garden, brushed her mouth with her hand, and ran back. She dashed towards a distraught man who was shouting: Koshavaaaaaa. Maria shot the damaged bus which had been turned into a monstrous installation of burned iron; she shot the ambulances, the paramedics, the police officers, the surviving Israeli tourists who were still circling aimlessly and madly around—a girl with a striped sailor T-shirt, standing straight, pressing her injured arm against her body, and staring with horror-struck eyes. Maria was running, shooting, and at the same time a thought was continuously nagging at her: here's the news, this is my big news... She felt she was starting to regain her senses. She looked around—there were no fellow journalists from other media, maybe they were still driving this way. Only a reporter, an acquaintance of hers from a local TV, was running around with her camera. The police officers were starting to fence off the perimeter with red bands and she suspected they wouldn't let anyone shoot.

She was chosen by Fate to land a mere two meters from the site of the big news. To get there in a matter of minutes. She was the only one to have shot photos in the first moments of horror—she and no one else. The wounded had already been carried to the ambulances, which were now racing to the hospitals in Burgas. Right at this moment officials were covering the remains of torn bodies with thin opaque nylon. Maria put the lens cap back on, thrust her hands in the pockets of her jeans and, staggering, and headed towards the exit. What was that? That was what? Was what that? When panicked, she repeated her chaotic thoughts by changing the order of words—she believed that this could be the lifeline to help her organize her former world as fast as possible.

She touched the first sunflower on its warm head and winced: there was a man in the field, raging, uprooting the flowers, swinging them over his head and throwing them on the ground. Koshavaaaaaaaaa... The same man, whom she had run into at the site of the explosion. She hesitated, then started towards him. She would remember this moment for life—the smoke from the airport spreading over the field, the man uprooting the stems and throwing them around, the field smelling bitter, the afternoon sun hanging over the world pouring out glowing embers. He noticed her, as if collecting himself, and stopped. A big man, almost a giant, but looking lost in the sea of sunflowers. Maria shouted towards him in her broken English: I am coming, in a minute.

His wife had been there. There. There. There. Koshava. His wife. Missing.

He looked through the airport. Entered the building. Peered in the buses. She was nowhere to be found. Nowhere. Nowhere.

Easy, Maria heard herself saying, just easy. We will go to the hospital, ask around. She might have been wounded and taken to the hospital.

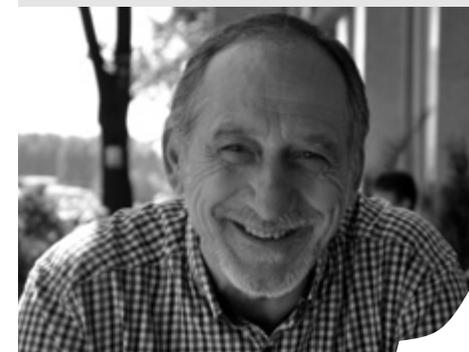
The man collapsed. Slid down to the ground. The uprooted sunflowers were scattered on the ground around him. Maria sat down as well. She slid the camera off her shoulder somewhat automatically, then jumped back up, fixing the blend, correcting the speed and finally shooting the man among the scattered sunflower stems with bearded roots heavy with parched clods of soil, like big tumors.

He was looking at her in a silent frenzy. She flung the camera back on her shoulder, touched the man on the arm: Let's go. She was wearing an opal blue dress, Koshava, he blurted unexpectedly and pleadingly. Maria felt a cool wave crawling over her.

\*\*\*

“How to be who we truly are in this life, how to achieve and manifest our authentic personality and further on, the universal, the very meaning of being human. This existential problem has been articulated through different periods and cultures, but the creative substance is ever repeating and changing in a kind of sacred ritual, which is the most important experience for Kerana Angelova here on earth. The archetypal kinds of characters go, therefore, on to the next novel. They either keep their names or suggest similarity to the name of a previous character.”

*Dobrina Topalova, literary critic*



## Emil ANDREEV

was born on September 1, 1956, in the Danube town of Lom, Bulgaria. He graduated from Veliko Turnovo University “St. St. Cyril and Methodius” and has worked as a teacher, a journalist and a university lecturer. He has been a freelance writer since the year 2001. Andreev is the author of: *Lom Stories*, *The Drunkards’ Island*, *Bobby the Blessed and the Other American*, etc.; the novels *The Glass River*, *The Curse of the Frog*, etc.

He is the winner of the VICK prize for Novel of the Year (*The Glass River*, 2005) and the Helikon award for Novel of the Year (*The Curse of the Frog*, 2007). He is also the author of the plays *To Kill a Prime Minister*, *Treasure Hunters*, *Jay’s Magic Boat*, and others. His novel, *The Glass River*, was filmed and released in September 2010. Andreev also took part in screenwriting the television series *Under Cover*, *Fourth Power*, *Vern’s Riddle*, *Pearl Buttons*, etc.

## Bibliography

- Lom Stories*, short stories, 1996, Free Poetic Society, Sofia
- Late Art Nouveau*, novel, 1998, Free Poetic Society, Sofia
- The Drunkards' Island*, short stories, 1999, Free Poetic Society, Sofia
- To Kill a Prime Minister*, play, 2002, staged more than 70 times
- The Treasure Hunters*, play, 2004
- The Glass River*, novel, 2004, East-West, Sofia
- The Glass River*, second edition, 2005, Faber, Veliko Turnovo-Sofia
- Lom Stories*, second edition, 2006, Faber, Veliko Turnovo-Sofia
- The Curse of the Frog*, novel, 2006, Ciela, Sofia
- J's Magical Boat*, play, 2007, staged more than 10 times
- Crazy Luke*, novel, 2010, Faber, Veliko Turnovo-Sofia
- Raul di Sticla (The Glass River)*, 2011, Humanitas, Bucharest, Romania
- The Glass River*, 2011, YouWriteOn, London, UK
- Staklena reka*, 2012, Oktoih, Podgorica, Monte Negro
- Lomskie opowesci*, 2014, Toczka, Krakow, Poland
- Bobby the Blessed and the Other American*, 2015, Hermes, Bulgaria
- Staklena rijeka*, 2015, V.B.Z., Zagreb, Croatia

### BOBBY THE BLESSED AND THE OTHER AMERICAN

#### A short review

The last book by Emil Andreev is a collection of short and long stories. One of the latter gives the name of the book. The stories are about human kindness, innocence and impossible love. Some of them trace peoples' lives back in time, some show us the unbearable conditions of their being that slowly turn them into "dreamers," as the author often calls them.

Like in all his other works, Andreev is a magnificent story-teller and "leads the reader to deep but sometimes treacherous waters" as writer Matthew Kneale puts it on the back cover of the book. Andreev's style is magnificent and gives you no break until you finish the book. A witness of our times, he poses questions to think over and to reconsider the values of our present-day life and culture.



## The Bitch and the Bastard and the Clock on the Wall

An excerpt from the book *Bobby the Blessed and the Other American* / Translated by Valentina Rasheva

*Nothing changes, apparently, about love.*

Alice Munro

She was beautiful as hell and he was tender as heaven. And they fell in love, so much in love that even the earth couldn't stand it. Not that this crowded world gave a damn about them (in a way, it was fed up with secret loves like theirs), but there was something outrageous in their egoistic insistence on being unique.

They met near the Danube in a small old town in Pannonia where people spoke a language they didn't. Neither of them spoke the other's language. In fact, their languages were totally different. Hers was from the Roman branch and his was from the Slavic one. Yet, they fell in love using a third system for communication – a langue from the Germanic branch. Thus their mother tongues gave way to an impartial expression of their emotions.

It happened near that pond studded with lilies where they felt the thrill of enchantment, after their warm bodies touched for the picture they were taking to commemorate the event. Later, in all the hotels of Europe where they met in private, they would always remember this fateful moment of their first touch. The copulations that followed were sublime.

And they started to live for this – to meet somewhere for a week, to love and adore their bodies and souls, feeling like the first lovers in the world. They enjoyed the secrecy of being together in the cities of the world. They were free

and happy like innocent children whose only concern was to be fully amused till darkness cuddled them together in its lap for endless satisfaction.

One day, in the town of B, a year after their first encounter, it was he who decided to stop time forever. At first, she did not believe him but later on she agreed, for both of them were fed up with being separated.

“But how?” she asked. “You have to stop the earth from rolling around.”

“You know me, I can do it. I am a miracle worker!” He smiled like Narcissus himself before seeing his own reflection in the pool.

“You are a bastard, that’s what you are!” And she gave him a gentle kiss, happy with the artificial perspective of being together forever. Yet, in her own way, she did believe him.

“My dear twin-sister bitch, in love and literature everything is possible!” he assured her, then held her enticing body close to his. “Just let me try!”

They were naked in bed and in front of them, on the wall, there was a square-shaped cheap hotel clock annoyingly uttering its tick-tock in the room. Its second hand was stepping slowly ahead of the noise and dragging the minute hand towards 11:50 PM sharp.

He kissed her loudly then snapped his fingers but the ugly clock did not react. She sniggled graciously, then gave him the most desirous blue-eyed look and mounted his hairless scrawny body. With her lips she caressed his nipples successively and finally she bit the one that was above his throbbing heart.

Stubborn as he was, the bastard didn’t give up but kept on snapping his fingers with each clatter of the clock.

“Stop, for God’s sake!” shouted the bastard in a mixed sensation of a miracle, failure and sweet nipple pain kindling his libido.

The second hand kept on moving, but just as it went on top of the minute hand it stopped and the clock grew silent forever.

An enormous “Yes!” filled up the whole room. Then the bastard also grew more and more and eventually penetrated her hot and juicy vagina for a slow and long trip to eternity. The lilies of the pond started dancing behind their closed twin-eyes like little elves hopping in the valley of immortality.

Only when they finished did she realize that the miracle had happened.

“And now what?” both asked aloud simultaneously.

The clock watched them silently without the slightest idea of a reasonable answer. It was hanging there – ten minutes to twelve midnight – useless, sad and timeless. The bitch and the bastard gazed at the clock with suspicion that still lingered in the empty space around them.

Yes, their dream came true! No more separation, no more painful longing for each other and no more virtual life through letters, phone-calls and Skype. Always together, side by side and everywhere. The bliss was devouring them piece by piece until at the end they felt the need to share it by joining their bodies together again amidst the whirling dance of the elves and the lilies.

Played out and weary, they finally fell asleep in the longest dream they had ever had.

Now they are in M walking beside a cathedral... eating in an Italian restaurant... arguing about directions in front of the Town Hall... minding the gap of the bed and swearing for the first time for their love to be continued... then – in L listening to the hoof beats of the Kings Guards parading under their hotel window... sitting on a bench in a park watching the ducks in the lake... basking in the sun in front of the Royal Palace... then – in P kissing on the stage of the Ancient Theatre... then – in V, in a gallery scrutinizing the pictures of Paul Klee... and finally – in the Sidney Opera House listening to Mahler’s Second Symphony...

She woke up first, resurrected by the music that was still sounding in her head. When she looked at the clock it showed 11:50 as before but she didn’t notice the second hand moving.

Trying not to wake her lover up, she rose quietly but just as her foot touched the floor the bastard whispered: “That symphony last night was too much for me but I liked it! The orchestra is still playing in my brain.”

She smiled and went to the bathroom. He opened the balcony door to let the fresh air in and followed her without paying any attention to the clock. There she was standing in front of the mirror watching her beautiful face of a goddess. He approached her, kissed her neck and said: “Thanks for the lovely night! You were so kind!”

Both burst in laughter and stared at their reflections. They were so young and happy... Neither of them could realize that they had grown twenty-five years older.

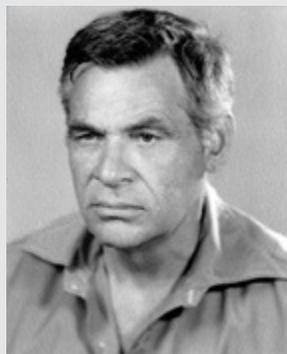
Back in the room, the bitch and the bastard heard the clock strike 12 AM and smelled the salty odor of this average day coming from the Tasman Sea.

“Isn’t it amazing? The clock started working again!” exclaimed the bitch with an awesome smile.

“Remember what I told you once...” the bastard answered. “Everything is possible in love and literature!”

They both laughed again and looked down under. Sidney was rushing as usual on the rolling earth.

# B



## Georgi BOJINOV

was born in 1924 in Bulgaria. He studied Philosophy and Russian Philology at Sofia University. He worked as a correspondent for some of the biggest national newspapers.

After the publication of his travelogue *Green Forest, Cold Water* in *September* magazine in 1975, documenting the testimonies of five Bulgarians held in Stalin's camps, he was fired and remained unemployed and unpublished for the rest of his life.

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

*Deep in the Woods of Diktcham* (short stories and essays), Sofia, Balgarski Pisatel, 1960.

*Yulen* (travelogue), Sofia, Balgarski Pisatel, 1967.

*Karadjata* (historical novella about Stefan Karadja), Sofia, Narodna Mladezh, 1972.

*The Cuckoo Cries* (documentary short stories and travel notes) Sofia, Balgarski Pisatel, 1980.

*From Echo to Age* (essay on the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-1878), Sofia, Izdatelstvo na OF, 1982

*The Gray Wanderer* (short stories for teenagers), Sofia, Balgarski Pisatel, 1986

*Cherry Waters* (documentary short stories and travel notes), Sofia, Profizdat, 1986

*Kalunya-Kalya* (a novel), Sofia, Balgarski Pisatel, 1988, Second edition: Hermes Publishing House, 2014

### **KALUNYA-KALYA**

#### *A short review*

*Kalunya-kalya* is Georgi Bozhinov's only novel – a forgotten masterpiece about the April Uprising, released back in 1988. The new edition of *Kalunya-kalya* puts Georgi Bozhinov's name back on Bulgaria's literary scene, rearranging its front lines. Because Georgi Bozhinov is unquestionably one of the greatest Bulgarian writers.

*Kalunya-kalya* tells the story of the April Uprising, but from an unexpected perspective – through the eyes of the Bulgarian Muslims. And this is what makes the book so interesting and unusual. One of the most fateful and bloody events in Bulgarian history is presented through the narratives and lives of the Bulgarian Muslims. *Kalunya-kalya* is an extraordinarily realistic and dramatic novel.



## Kalunya-kalya

*Excerpt / Translated by Valentina Rasheva*

He was walking along the ravaged street and no longer looked at anything; he was only thinking of that house down at the bottom end. There, in that house, was the one person who could tell him what this was. He was slowly moving downhill, the mare struggling and snorting, her ears erect. The sound of a choked, muffled growl reached him from somewhere close. He stopped and looked but could not work out where the sound was coming from. He peered from behind a fence and just then saw the dogs: there were two of them, in a scuffle over something. All he could see were some white ribs, sticking out like a comb with missing teeth. Another dog appeared on the side, out of the blue, ready to cross the road, but the man and his horse were blocking its way. The bristling hungry dog with a sagging belly was dragging some large, hairy, dark ball. The dog stopped dead in its tracks; so did the man. The two stood face to face, looking each other in the eye. The dog then dropped the ball onto the ground, its muzzle wrinkled, teeth glistened – and repeatedly breathed in and out so much poisonous hatred against the man that the man took an involuntary step back. The dog picked up its ball again and crossed the street at an angle, trotting in small steps and still glaring back savagely at the man, afraid he might take its ball away. Then the man saw that the ball

was a human head.... As he progressed downhill, the stench of smoke, of soot, of death, got even thicker; a stifling insipid stench that makes your stomach turn. Kalunyo took several more tentative steps, then paused and considered going back. But he didn't go back. He continued downhill. His stiffened body walked down as if on its own volition, drawn by something that was over and above human will and sanity. Down below, in the silence of death, a live human swarm only until yesterday, past the burned-down, dilapidated houses that had only until yesterday been the vessels of human lives, now ruined beyond repair, through this terrible, terrible dogs' world, deranged and suddenly gone mad with animal savagery... He stopped. He thought he heard... no, it wasn't a dog whining, it wasn't a human scream. It was something else. Then again, the same sound was heard, the same howl, dark and piercing, that makes the hairs of one's very soul rise. It was not a howl. It was a song. It was so wild and scary to hear a song in this human desert. He listened carefully – had he really heard it? Where did the voice come from?... His heart thumped heavily, as if wanting to break out of his chest... It was a woman singing. She would start and stop, then start again. Her voice started low, as if from some great depth, then rise, uttering strings of words that he could not make out. Then the words would suddenly stop. She'd take a breath, wait a little. Then she'd start again – from deep down, the same, still the same, again, from the very depths of human sorrow. And he could not work out whence this voice came. Or did it spring from everywhere around him, like the cry of the cuckoo does? ... He stopped and looked at one of the gates; inside was just ruin and silence. The same behind the next gate. He stood, looked around, waited to hear it again. His eyes swept to the other side of the street and stopped on a stone wall, with a roof over the gate. In the young foliage of the vine, over the stone walls, roof tiles appeared, something white, looking like the walls of a house. The two wings of the gate lay crushed on the ground, the wide hole gaping. Kalunyo stood in the hole and looked inside at the trodden flowerbeds. The woman was sitting in the doorway and staring at him. He headscarf untied, the ends drooping down, as in great, choking sorrow; her hair was down, too, her eyes, crazed and bulging, stared at him. He hung the reins on a tree that stuck out, broken, near the gate, and walked slowly along the cobblestone path. The woman sat curled up in the doorway and watched him. Then he saw that she was looking not at him but at the gate, that she could not see him, could not see anything; she was looking but not seeing... And just then, as she was looking, she started singing again, in a chant. Her voice rose and one couldn't tell whether this was song, a cry, or a laugh. 'Oho-ho-hoooo!... The

children! ... Mama's sweet babies! ... My children are gone, my babies... My babies are gone... Where's my babies? ... Oho-ho-hoooo!... My sweet little babies... Where are my babies... my children are gone... Mama's sweet little darlings, my babies.... my babies... My darling little ones. Oho-ho-hoooo!

The woman stopped, out of breath, swayed, as if beating herself against something, grabbed her long hair with both hands and pulled it down over her face; she had fistfuls of torn-out hair in her hands already, streamlets of blood gushed down her face. Her gaze turned to the emptiness; the voice started chanting again: 'Where's my babies, babies, sweet little ones.... My babies are gone.... Oho-ho-hoooo!...'

Kalunyo stepped back. Unthinkingly, he walked back along the cobbled pathway, unhooked the reins and started down the hill. The woman's voice followed him, and he was fleeing from it, wanted to flee, not to hear it, but the voice followed him even when it had faded away: the babies, the babies... Down I go! Farther away from this voice which had no echo, no response and no solace from anywhere, and never would have, ever. He still heard the voice around him, quiet and intimate, whispered by the demolished walls, the stones, the hedges, the charred walls of houses. Oho-ho-hoooo!... The babies, the babies! Where did the cuckoo's cry come from? It was everywhere, streaming from everywhere, whispering, quietly and incessantly, hammering into his heart, echoing in his head – even when he could hear it no more. The voice was asking the surrounding silence about the children, calling the children from the wilderness, praying to the wilderness to return them, if they had gone to play somewhere, if they got carried away and forgot to be home on time. Has anybody seen my babies? Bring them home to me if you see them! Oho-ho-hoooo!!!... Mama's sweet little children.... The voice was singing and crying, without tears. The voice was hoping for a miracle so the little children would come back smiling, with blushing cheeks, and run to Mama, she is so waiting for them... The children had been there. Until yesterday. This morning, probably. Alive and giggling, skipping and jumping. Like before, Kalunyo thought of turning back and running, far, far away back, somewhere. So he could not see or hear. There, in the woods somewhere, with the meadows and sheep, where it's green and quiet and sunny. To be engulfed there in the golden softness of the grass, listening to the voices of the forest. And to forget everything, everything!



## Mona CHOBAN

Born on October 13, 1968, in Pleven, Bulgaria.

1994 graduated from the M. Gorki Literary Institute in Moscow.

1998 instituted the Order of Mediterranean Troubadours.

1999 – first meeting of Mediterranean poets, part of the Arts Exhibition at the National Palace of Culture, Bulgaria.

2000 – second meeting of Mediterranean poets, part of the Arts Exhibition at the National Palace of Culture, Bulgaria.

2003 – coordinator of *Turkish Gambit* – a film directed by N. Mihalkov.

2004 – coordinator of *Master and Margarita* – a film directed by V. Bortko.

Currently living in Paris and Kiselchovo.

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

2005 – *Sex Is Not a Reason for Acquaintance*, publ. Kragozor

2006 – *No More Men – Till the Next One*, publ. Kragozor

2007 – *One, Two, Three*, publ. Ciela

2009 – *Paris 18*, publ. Ciela

2012 – *Dosta*, publ. Advertise

## DOSTA

### Synopsis

Katerina and Mano have lived in Paris for 30 years. Tired of the vanity and noise of the big city, they bought a house in a village, distanced in time and space from civilization. In a quest to look further into herself, Katerina suddenly set out for the village, alone for the first time in her life.

However, the village has its secrets, history and mystique which slowly begin to unfold. An old knife falls out from a crack between the stones. The local eccentric “Mobeia” begins to have visions, which are an inexplicable collage of legend and reality. A powerful curse hung over his family – all the girls died before the age of twenty.

The mystery is unravelled when Professor Dosev, an old friend of Katerina and Mano, arrives. Thousands of letters that reveal a mystical though true story had led him to the village.

A local girl, Dosta, and a French Captain, De Pere, fell in love and married. A year after their marriage, while Captain de Pere was away on a long assignment, a band of Circassian refugees passed through the village. They were ruled by a cruel code of law and pillaged and killed unscrupulously. Their leader saw Dosta and declared that he would come back to take her away. To save her from the hands of the Circassians and to protect the lives of her small child, her beloved and her parents, Dosta begs her father to build her shadow into the bridge which he is building. According to local legend, she faded and died “accidentally” within forty days. Her father made the most difficult decision of his life, to kill his own child in order to save the life of his grandchild.

This story makes Katerina and Mano look at their lives and their relationships through different eyes. What is invisible to some is visible to others.



## Dosta

Excerpt / Translated by Christopher Buxton

The eighteen old folk remaining in the village were unusually pleased with their new neighbour. It took them almost a year to get used to her. While Katerina and her husband worked on the house, repaired it, readied it for its new different life, the old folk passed by, tut-tutted, and sneaked glances. “These townies, what brought them out here in the wilds? What’s it to them?” “Blimey, they’ve even put a toilet inside, crazy,” and someone would reassuringly add – “They’ll fix this house, they’ll play around with it, and they’ll furnish it. Then afterwards they’ll never set foot in it again.” But Katerina passed their tests. She didn’t live down to their expectations. She fixed the house, got it in shipshape and began to come more and more often.

Through laughter, she told them she was getting a new life together and that soon she’d be living with them all the time. They did not believe her overmuch. They’d seen others like her. They bought houses, fixed this and that, came some summer or other and then were never seen again. That’s what happened with the English on the ridge up there and with those Sofia folk by the pub. They bought houses – repairs here, workmen there, they appeared like lords of the manor – gave out instructions, stopped their car in the town square, the lady got out – looked about, shouted at the workmen, and then went away again. They

rebuilt the two houses anew, both over-decorated, ridiculous, different... And then they turned up some Saturday and Sunday, then some Summer or New Year, and on and on till they had got through all their friends and relations and finally no-one came. The Sofia folk were keeping the houses for their children supposedly, but try telling that to the people of Buinovo. And the English still declared that they were going to live there once they were retired. They were just spouting a lot of wind – they were talking but they themselves didn't believe it. A house, if you don't stroke her every day, if you don't light her fire, if you don't make her floorboards creak, you won't fall in love with her, and she won't care for you. A house is like a wife – she needs care and sincerity, if you con her and only drop in on her from time to time, she'll begin to wait for you, wait more and then start to trick you. Either the roof will leak, or mice will move in, or, as if by coincidence, she'll offer shelter to some squirrel from the woods, or spiders will festoon her. Because both a house and a wife want to feel your breath, to drink it in for luck, so that whether you pamper them or push them away, they want you to play; and just as they please you with something, they find something else to worry you with, and either they bring you great joy or make you think about them so they don't leave you in peace. That's what they're like – they want what's owed to them and if for a long time you don't give it, you're not going to keep them.

The old folk didn't believe Katerina, but they'd grown to like her. She was like a late born child that they cared for with unusual love and patience. Well their own children had left for the city a long time ago or escaped to foreign parts. They earned their keep and chased happiness. And she'd come to tell them that she was seeking hers here. And bit by bit they accepted her, began to help her, to teach her, to remind themselves of knowledge and skills.

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The first year she and Mano fixed the house. The second year they got stuck in the garden. The third year they struggled with the barn which once had sheltered various animals, but now lay empty like a monument to times gone by. It's tough to recast something, which has had a different life – it had been a barn after all. Katerina had ideas, but there was always something getting in their way. A new house had to grow out of the old barn with a folk-style bar downstairs and a workshop on the first floor. That's how she pictured it in her imagination during dark nights: such a place to let inspiration soar there on the first floor, she'd have an exclusive room of her very own. An enormous room of sixty square metres, where she could paint, weave on the loom, read (books

she'd not yet managed to open up till now), knit, embroider, to try everything she'd wanted to try but had had no time for. She knew that she wanted to live somehow otherwise and this otherwise she saw as involving these sorts of activity – woman stuff. And then in the evening to slip down the spiral staircase, to lean back on the bench, to put her elbows on the table and to bask in the warmth of the chimney fire. To relax beside Mano and he beside her, to talk quietly, while he stayed silent and listened, as only he knew how...

While she was fighting with her personal architectural worries, spring arrived. To the voices of the beggars down below were added those of Parisian blackbirds. More and more often the window stayed open at night and more and more often the yearning for quiet fought with the noises outside. There was no question of when or how to wait for Mano's next holiday. She bought an aeroplane ticket and packed her bags. She announced her departure one evening between two glasses of Bordeaux. She told him shyly like a teenager who for the first time wants to break her parents' curfew, but resolutely, abruptly, in a tone that brooked no opposition. And Mano understood or rather felt. He didn't stop her. He didn't say anything. Only his smile revealed some crowning joy that the long awaited moment had come, that Katerina's love for the house was now irreversible.

She left the next day.

C



## Silvia CHOLEVA

is a Bulgarian writer, journalist and publisher. She was born in Sofia (1959), where she finished her degree in Bulgarian philology at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. She was editor and editor-in-chief of two of the most prestigious Bulgarian literature and culture magazines – *Sezon* and *altera*.

She works for the Bulgarian National Radio and hosts a radio programme for literature and culture, she is also editor of *Literary Newspaper* and teaches essay writing at Sofia University. She is one of the founders of DA Poetry Publishing that publishes contemporary Bulgarian poets and authors like Eva Lipska, Lars Saabye Christensen, Alesh Debeliak, Enis Batur etc.

Silvia Choleva has been translated in anthologies and different foreign magazines, she was awarded the most prestigious national awards and participated in several European Literature festivals.

She has five poetry books, two books of poetic prose, one novel *Green and Gold* and a collection of short stories *Goshko*. She is the author of two plays and one short-movie script *My Mother*.

### GREEN AND GOLD

#### *Synopsis*

A woman is trying to find time for herself; to gather the pieces of her life and figure them out through life and death. The children have grown up, her relationship with her husband has come to a deadlock, and the town does not offer any chance to be wrapped in your own thoughts. In search of her time and place, she finds them in the house of her childhood in the provinces. She is travelling back and forth, up to the town and down to the country while asking herself where she belongs, what she is doing and how she is spending her life. The sudden death of her father sets off recollections from long ago and memories about the past. During one of her trips, she finds some old film from a camera. She goes back to town, gets them developed and in the black and white pictures sees herself as a child, and finds the images of her mother, father and relatives. The time of her childhood and the years when her parents were young, was the time of socialism. The past with all its comic and tragic faces comes out through the eyes of the child in the photos, but it has left its print on everybody.

*Green and Gold* draws on the resource of the autobiographical to go beyond it.



## Green and Gold

Excerpt / Translated by Irene Boikikeva

*To my father*

She has no idea if the time she has left is enough. But the desire is stronger than common sense and she starts piling pillows to hem in the corner of the huge bed where she could sink fully in her thoughts and find peace at last. In the house time has its own clock, slow and different. She hopes nobody is going to look for her.

She falls asleep before she knows it, carried away by shouts and voices distant as the world outside this room. Everything starts from the beginning like the breaking day.

### Summer

A little girl sitting on her heels is busy digging mud for the little bricks she is going to shape using a box of matches. Then she'll try to build the first wall of the little house, but the wall will fall again and again. Don't cry, come here and drink your milk. Her granny is standing there with her hand outstretched. The milk in the cup is hot and greasy from the extra spoon of butter. This time I'll be watching her right through the end, until not a drop is left in the cup, and she won't be able to pour it out into the roots of the vine-arbour. The stomach

shrinks in pain, the liquid goes all the way back up to burst into a beautiful fountain forward and upward, but the grandma is already shuffling her slippers back to the house and cannot enjoy the happening. Suddenly, the gate in the yard opens. The child turns round fast. Daddy! Her cry reaches her father as quick as her bare feet.

Here the dream comes to an end. Before waking up she is not sure if she had reached her father or not; and the running towards him – doesn't it happen again and again, isn't it too slow, who is the one she's hugging in the end, waving hands and reaching violently for the emptiness.

Years have passed since then, and her father and grandma are gone. It has been quite long since daybreak and it's high time she got up. She came back to the village to do some work but, to tell the truth, for some days now one and the same thing has been happening over and over again: all night, time after time, she's telling the story to herself.

Her mother opened the drawer of the wooden dresser and started fumbling inside. Ah, we'll be tidying up again. She smiled and headed down the creaking steps. She had been here for a few days, and they managed to have a fight five times, and make up again. That's why now she preferred not to say a word and have her coffee at ease. In the summer the vine-arbour cast a spotted shadow in their village yard. The coffee tasted different here, rich with the blending smell of sheep, pigs, wet grass and figs.

I found them! Her mother's voice came from above. She got up reluctantly and climbed the stairs again. She was holding something wrapped in crumpled paper. She uncovered the paper to show the rolls of black and white photo film. Each summer we come here, I say I'll give them to you to have them developed in town – the words came from afar, and while turning the page she found this morning was actually the triumph of boredom. Bored to death by her mother, shoveling through old cupboards, wardrobes and drawers and by her amazing quality to always find something for you to do, and interrupt you at ill-timed moments – when you're reading, writing, or just thinking.

On the other day she finished the book by Daniela Hodrova *Double Start – a Novel about the Dead* and thought that it would be a good idea to make her mom and dad read it – such a bright story about death. The day passed doing trivial things.

On the next day early in the morning, her father died.

They had nothing to do in the village house anymore. It looked unusually empty in the light of this August afternoon. In four hours they were back in town.

Until I grew up, the folds on the trunk of the vine-arbour I used to lean on were twice as many, and the knots got bigger – my back hurt. Reading books in the long summer hours makes the body lazy and cultivates an ability to focus on the insignificant stories filling the pages, or to gaze idly at the green leaves above. The green grapes have this property of attracting a child as curiosity – the taste of sour fruit lingers in the mouth to be slowly replaced by the sweet feel. I put so much passion into squeezing the green grapes and with the same vigour I tortured the rosebuds, still holding tight their fresh petals and the young stigma inside.

Today I have noticed the same pointless cruelty between the tender fingers of my children. The cruelty we nourish all our lives, fooling ourselves in the childish unawareness, in adolescent insecurity or the revengeful nature of old age. We have been so cleverly cheated, it's gone – the cruelty to ourselves.

The goatherd is walking down the next street and I can see nothing else but his broad back and wide step. I can only imagine his beard and just picture every other detail by his deep-toned voice: *Yaa, ya-a, yaaa, whew!* What does he want to say? He's probably the only man in this village who went to live in Sofia, but couldn't stand it and came back here. All the others have stayed. They had horses, my grandma told me, stout and strong people they were, not afraid of any kind of work. Once his father was busy plowing or whatever and the horses dropped down dead tired, but he didn't. He stood there wondering how to gear up his motorcycle and be able to both ride it and do the plowing or whatever he was doing. Now his son, the new goatherd, had a donkey and a cart. As for us, we have already sold the goat, and the buffalo-cow before that, and we don't have a pig and hens either. Our dog died, and a cat that used to come up as soon as we were back in the summer got lost somewhere. It might have followed the car on our way back to Sofia in autumn, but I don't believe that was the case because I have read that cats get attached to houses and not to people, or not so much. I like dogs better.

The baby goats were gone, too, when they were quite little, with their soft earrings, wet muffle, and the small round balls I collect after them. My grandma and grandpa are also gone to their heavenly roads – years have passed since then, and I have seldom dreamt about them. Otherwise, the house is still there, somewhat repaired by my father, the son; the yard has been slowly growing grim and wild; snowdrops and crocuses grow in spring, the walnut tree has been cut down, the barn has been taken down together with the empty sheds for the animals. The salt is also gone; it might have melted in the rain, I don't know.



## Lea COHEN

has been one of the most successful writers over the last decade. She has written 10 novels and a theatre play. In addition, there is a movie based on her novel *The Sound Hunter*. In 2010 Lea Cohen's novel *Das Calderon Imperium* was published by the Austrian publisher Paul Zsolnay. The book received many nominations in national and international book contests.

In 2013 the Spanish publisher Libros del Asteroide published Lea Cohen's novel *La Estratagema*, which subsequently became *The Book of August*. Next year Libros del Asteroide will be publishing another of her novels – *Bye, Bye, Brussels*.

Lea Cohen's novel – *The Piano of the Block 31* – has been translated into more than 10 languages and has been awarded by the Goethe Institut.

In 2013 her documentary book *You believe. Eight Views on the Holocaust in the Balkans* was translated into English and Macedonian. She has been the only Bulgarian writer to describe the tough times in Bulgaria between 1940 and 1944, when 11346 of the Jews in Bulgarian-occupied Macedonia and Thrace were deported to death camps.

In 2014 Lea Cohen wrote the novel *The Collector of Diaries*, which describes the same dark period in Bulgaria.

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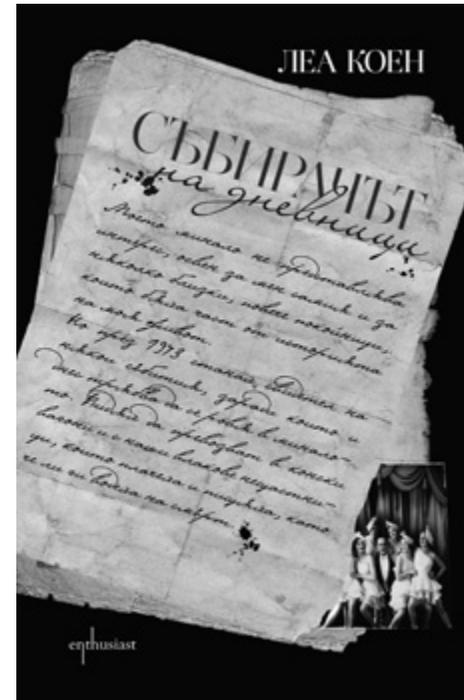
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*The Short Eternity of Alma M*, novel, GAL-IKO Publishing, 1997

*Till Death Do Us Part*, novel, Kralitsa Mab Publishing, 1996

Lea Cohen is also the author of three books about music: *Lyubomir Pipkov*, *Paul Hindemith*, and *M. Croche and M. Debussy*.

She has also written a screenplay based on the novel *The Pursuer of Sounds* (2009) and the play *Bitter Cherries* (2000).



## THE COLLECTOR OF DIARIES

*Diaries used to be the victory over the oblivion. People used to take notes of what they had been doing in order to know later on what to remember and what to forget. They were so pleased with themselves that rarely did they know how the already written could testify against them someday.*

In 2013 a former actress was found dead in her own apartment. A few days after her tragic death, a young publisher receives the first of several anonymous manuscripts. The only thing these manuscripts have in common is the name of the exclusive cabaret performer Esther Berger who disappeared mysteriously in 1943, when the writer Nestor Kalev was

not even born. The publisher's desire to find the truth about one particular disappearance has been encouraged by filial scruples and professional interest. The only way he could achieve his goal is by finding evidence from people who are still alive and whose destinies have been connected to Esther Berger.

Based on actual events from the dark years of the Second World War and the fate of the Jews in the Balkans, this criminal subject includes famous characters such as the married couple Filovi and Beckerle, Prince Kiril, Albert Goering, King Boris III. The past convincingly enters the present day with its new Sofia elite in order to both disentangle an intrigue of past crimes and learn a lesson.

## The Collector of Diaries

Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel

He met us upright, cleanly shaven, dressed in a dark-red robe, but wearing his invariable white sneakers. His upright carriage gave him the look of a retired general, while his impressive height was the bluff from which he gazed at the world with the condescension of his one hundred years. In his presence, I suddenly felt very young and insignificant. Lydia also suddenly looked like a little girl, gazing at the old man in awe. With a little effort, we could be his great-granddaughters.

He showed us around the spacious, five-room apartment on the first floor and told us the history of the house. It was built the year he was born, hence it was a centenarian like him. Old Mois's father, Avram Yakov, had received this lot from city hall as a reward for his personal services to the fatherland, because he had fought in the siege of Pleven and had been gravely wounded by a Turkish bullet. At that time, the lot was still outside the city limits and around it there were many deserted plots where sheep and donkeys grazed. Avram Yakov's wife, Victoria, wouldn't hear of building a house so close to the place of Levski's execution – according to Mois' mother, that brought bad luck. And so the lot stood empty while the family grew larger. When there were already five children, Avram Yakov made a decision. He now had money and asked one of the leading architects of the time to draft a design. Most Bulgarian architects at that time had studied in Austria, so the house was built following the Viennese model. The architect added Stars of David to the iron grating at Yakov's request. For nearly a quarter-century, Avram Yakov's family lived there, their sons and daughters were married there, their grandchildren were born.

"So, you have a big, happy family," Lydia concluded.

The old man smiled vaguely at her words.

The house, which stood across from the old artillery barracks, was declared "strategic" in 1941 and was confiscated. Several German command units were housed there. The Germans didn't even notice the Stars of David on the iron railings of the balconies. Old Mois's large family was moved to two small rooms in the "Jewish ghetto" along Maria Louisa Boulevard. They passed through all the vicissitudes of Jewish persecution: they wore yellow stars, suffered hunger and cold, they were forcibly resettled all over the country, some to Vratsa, some to Stara Zagora, the men worked in labor camps, while the women managed to

eke out a miserable existence by selling what little they had left.

Old Mois was the youngest son and the luckiest of them all. Only crumbs remained of his father's family. Avram Yakov's sisters and brothers lived in Thessaloniki and Kavala and they all disappeared. It's a long story, he wouldn't bother them with it now. When they were transported to occupied Poland, they had passed through Bulgaria. But Avram hadn't even realized it. When he found out later, he cried for the first time in his life. He ordered Mois to discover what had happened to them. They had all been resettled – some scattered across the world, others to the beyond. Some went naturally, while others – against their will. Old Mois had two older sisters, Julie and Miriam, who had gone to France in the 1930s to study tailoring and had never come back. They were likely deported to Auschwitz with the French Jews. He was under orders from his father to find out about them, too.

After the war, when everyone in the family came back from the provinces, they found the house completely pillaged, all the furniture and belongings had been removed and likely sold. Since it was "strategic," this time the house served as a general headquarters for the Russians, for which reason Avram Yakov's family once again found themselves homeless. After the Russians, the rooms were given to "boarders," as they were called back then – the police, military men. One family lived in each room. It looked like a dormitory or army barracks, but unlike the latter no one maintained any discipline. It was noisy and dirty, and the people were scowling, mistrustful and unfriendly to one another. They freed up two rooms for Yakov and his family, into which they all settled somehow or other, barely finding room for everyone to sleep. Old Mois's mother, Victoria, and his wife Mathilda, took turns cooking on a burner in the kitchen, where the scents of several pots mingled, each of which had to feed a different family. They lived like that for several years, until Old Mois's remaining living relatives decided to leave their homeland to find a new fatherland – Israel. He himself stayed behind with his family because of his elderly parents, who, exhausted from so many ordeals, did not want to travel anywhere anymore.

"Unlike those other brothers in the Bible, I stayed here, while my brother Aron led the others into the desert."

Lydia looked confused.

"Haven't you read the Bible?" The old man shot a glance at her.

"No, she's read *Under the Yoke*," I answered in her place.



## Petar DELCHEV

His first literary work was the poetry collection *Crazy Enough for Love*, published in early 2006 by the Slovoto Association. His next book, the short story collection *Stories from Trun*, appeared at the end of the same year from the same publisher and was nominated for the 2007 Elias Canetti National Literary Prize. His second prose work, *Balkan Suite*, came out in early 2009. In 2012, Ciela published his novel *Casting Call for a Messiah*. In late 2013, a new joint edition of *Stories from Trun/Balkan Suite* was released by the same publisher.

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

*Crazy Enough for Love* (2006) – poetry

*Stories from Trun* (2006) – short stories

*Balkan Suite* (2009) – novel

*Casting Call for a Messiah* (2013) – novel



## Casting Call for a Messiah

*Synopsis*

In the year 2054 on an island in the South Pacific, more than 5,000 representatives of the largest Christian denominations arrive for an Ecumenical Council. Their goal is to overcome the millennium-long schism between them and to join together into a new united and powerful Church. Such a global player with more than three billion followers could pop the established world order like a soap bubble...

The unscrupulous media giant WRTT has stretched its tentacles towards the Council, sending its top reporter to the epicenter of the events, who has turned her beauty into a deadly weapon. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims – supporters and opponents of the unification – swarm the critical zone, drawing in Russia's Pacific naval fleet and an omnipotent Chinese gangster who enjoys government protection. The ocean's blue expanse becomes the arena, set and moving force behind the whirling vortex that brings to the surface the explosive question of the church's distance from faith, from piety, from people and from the original meaning of spirituality.

From the depths of *Casting Call for a Messiah*, the novel's whirlpool of action raises eternal questions about god and Faith.

*Casting Call for a Messiah* seems inevitable, growing for two thousand years from an ostensibly small crack in the foundation of Christianity. Get ready, a spiritual and civilizational cataclysm awaits!



# Theodora DIMOVA

is one of the most famous Bulgarian playwrights and novelist. She is the author of nine plays that have been staged in Bulgaria, as well as abroad. She has studied Drama in the Royal Court Theatre in London. In the last ten years she published her novels *Emine*, *Mothers*, *Adriana* and *Marma, Mariam*. In 2006 *Mothers* received the First Place Award for East European Literature in Vienna, which is granted by KulturKontakt, Bank of Austria and Wieser Verlag. The novel has eleven editions in Bulgaria and has been published in nine languages. In 2008 *Adriana* was nominated for one of the greatest Bulgarian literary awards and was published in France. In 2010 *Marma, Mariam* won the Hristo G. Danov Award. She writes weekly for *24 Chasa* newspaper.

Dimova's plays have been awarded several national drama prizes and are staged all over Bulgaria, as well as in Greece and Macedonia.

Theodora Dimova's works have been translated into several languages, including: French, German, Slovenian, Polish, and Russian.

She has won several prizes, including the Development Prize, an Award for Fiction from the Bulgarian Writers' Union, among others.

## *Bibliography*

*Neda and the Dogs* (1991) – collected plays

*Emine* (2001) – a novel

*Mothers* (2006) – a novel

*Adriana* (2008) – a novel

*The Invisible Way of Forgiveness* (2009) – collected plays

*Marma, Mariam* (2010) – a novel

*The Train to Emaus* (2013) – a novel

*Four Ways of Loving* (2014) – collected essays

## **MOTHERS**

### *Synopsis*

Andreyka's mother, Christina, is mentally ill. Drugged into a stupor, she is incapable of reacting to Andreyka. Christina only loves her pain. Andreyka's father, Pavel, looks after both of them.

Liya's dream is to become a ballerina. Her parents, Kerana and Yordan, cannot afford the fees. When her father is offered a literary prize worth 20,000 euros, Liya is ecstatic and certain that she can now fulfill her dream.

Dana's father, Ivan, is unemployed and blames the whole world for his problems. Her mother, Lidiya, has had to go to Cyprus to find work and regularly sends money which Ivan promptly drinks up.

Alexander has always felt in his heart that he was adopted. His mother, Marina, has no maternal instincts, hence Alex's suspicions. Marina and her husband, Petar, have few common interests and inevitably grow apart.

Nikola's first experience is that of abandonment and loneliness. His mother Albena is a top model and his father, known as the Eagle, is a gangster.

Deyan has a twin sister, Boyana. His mother, Nina, is a successful pharmacist and his father, Stefan, is a respected doctor. After an acrimonious divorce neither parent will accept responsibility for both children.

Kalina lives with her mother, Petya, and her grandmother, Siya, in a two-bedroom flat. She has never known her father.

In the final chapter, all the classmates meet in the park with Yavora. She has an important announcement. At the end of the school year, she and her boyfriend are going away to travel indefinitely. She will no longer be with them. They feel betrayed by the only adult they had learned to trust. Their despair turns to violence. They lash out, hitting, punching and kicking until she lies dead in a pool of blood.



## Mothers

*Excerpt / Translated by Francine Giguere*

ANDREYA

**P**lease, mama, don't go out, why? asked Christina and her eyes froze dead somewhere in space, in one of those torpors that were so scary and Andreya wasn't able to answer her, she had the feeling that her mother was dying during the few seconds when she froze, she wasn't sure that she would move again, why shouldn't I go out this evening? Christina asked again, bewildered, as if nothing had happened, I'll only take a walk, Christina shot an even stranger

glance at her, I'll just have a walk in the dark streets, you know, I know, mama, Andreya replied, and I'll follow you and I'll hide and I'll be afraid of the streets you walk along, I'll be afraid to go down the underpasses after you, to slip into the parks at your heels, to watch out for you, to follow you, to turn my back to you in the all-night stores while you pass near me not even suspecting that I'm around, to see how you look around, how you put a bottle of vodka in your pocket, how you look around again, so afraid, so petite, so slight, blue-eyed, with the huge bags under your eyes, I'll shake with fear that they'll catch you with the vodka, I'll see how you sit down on a bench, how you take a swig, how you light your first cigarette, how all sorts of characters keep passing by and you offer them vodka to drink and some of them sit with you, stoned, drunk and you'll all drink from the very same bottle of vodka, then I get tired of standing in the dark, in the bushes, behind some tree, I get tired of following you, I start to hate you, to hate you so much that my stomach starts to ache and I manage not to burst into tears and I manage not to shout with all my strength into the silence, into the night, a few metres away from you and your accidental company, why, why, why, Lord, did you give other children mothers, when you gave me this wreck, this trash infected with an incurable disease of the soul,

why didn't this trash manage to cope with this wound in her soul while others were managing, why was she drinking so much alcohol, what was she missing, what did she want, she had me, papa, her work, isn't that enough in the end, what more can a person want from life and where did her disease come from, all of the anguish that emanates from her, the degradation, the decay, why do you suffer, what are you missing, Andreya once asked her, aren't you satisfied, we have everything, papa works and earns enough, why are you always so sad, mama, why don't you ever laugh, why are you pulling such a horribly long face, tell me, I'm begging you, tell me and Christina answered: I wake up in the morning, as if I've been pulled out of a tar vat full of sorrow, I can hardly even breathe, I feel a physical exhaustion, as if I've been working all day and everything is black, black, black and I don't want to get up and I don't want to breathe any longer and nothing can cheer me up, every new thought just weighs me down more and pushes me further and further down into the tar vat of despair, but don't I make you happy, Andreya asked her, no, you don't make me happy, Andreya, you don't in the slightest make me happy, you know, the more you grow up, the more I regret that I had you, I regret that I married Pavel, I regret that I'm alive, I regret that I was even born and Pavel and you are both such a terrible burden on me, I have to admit to you, my darling, that sometimes I secretly imagine the two of you being run over by a streetcar at the same time, how I'm crying at your funeral and I'm wearing dark glasses, but deep inside me I'm happy, because now I'll be free to commit suicide, without worrying that my suicide will weigh on your soul, your life, your destiny, but, mama, how can you speak to me like that! asked Andreya as she ran her hand over her mother's long blonde curls, how can you be so beautiful and so unhappy, mama, do you really think I'm beautiful? asked Christina, everyone thinks you're beautiful, papa, your friends, your colleagues, papa claims that all of them were once in love with you, once, once, Christina repeated, once, but not now, now they don't give me their mobile phone numbers, they don't open their doors to me, they hide when I go to their places, when I give them a phone call, they just keep quiet and when I do happen to talk to them they just look at me, where did this sorrow come from, Andreya, this lack of joy, it's a disease, Andreya, this absence of the will to live, this rejection of heaven and earth, I don't know, Andreya, I'm thinking of paying someone to shoot me, of renting myself a killer, you can't talk to me like that, mama, you don't have the right to talk to me like that, if you agree to shoot me, Andreya, my child, it will be the best thing you can do for your mother, will you do it, Andreya, you'll be proud that you've done a really

good deed for your mother, no, please, crying irritates me, you know that crying doesn't achieve anything, only killing achieves something, and everything they say about crying is nothing but fiction, there are medicines for crying, if you continue, and you've already been crying all night, I'll give you one of my drugs that stop crying, that kill crying, just like I asked you to kill me! If you kill me, Andreyka, if you kill your mother, you won't be a matricide but a mother saver, I'll work out a plan for you to kill me, of course, I'd prefer a professional to do it, but you see, your father doesn't even leave me five *leva* to have in hand, do you think that I haven't tried, that I haven't contacted anyone, I have, Andreyka, I've tried, five thousand euros is the going rate, half before the killing and the other half after the killing, but in my case the whole amount in advance and Andreyka slides out of bed, choking on her tears, with reddened eyes, her face tear-stained, with that amnesia that stems from the throes of crying too much for too long, that obliteration of the causes, that torpor, as if Christina had succeeded in tearing out a part of her daughter's soul, at long last, after a long battle, she had succeeded in tearing it out and now she was consuming it greedily, she was chewing it perfidiously, she was gnawing this piece of Andreyka's soul, perhaps she thought that it would give her some strength or at least that she would infect her daughter with her disease and both of them would suffer together and together they would go into and out of the tar vat of despair and doom and misery, as if Christina bore a cross that was invisible to others, as if she were expiating a sin that was incomprehensible even to herself. The voices of Pavel and his friends were echoing in the entrance-hall where Andreyka was seeing her mother off on the incomprehensible nocturnal trajectories over which she had ranged for years while dreaming of her own death, her movements were slowed down by the medication, she was going down the stairs slowly, concentrating, she was holding on tightly to the railing, she stopped on the landing at the elevator, she opened the door, she didn't have enough strength to squeeze into the elevator quickly and deftly before its enormous iron door slammed into her, bending her shoulders and making her stagger and Andreyka was watching her from above and her heart was aching with pity for her mother, her medication, her nocturnal wanderings, because the metal elevator door crushed her and bent her shoulders and as she staggered, she turned toward her daughter apologetically and her eyes were saying: I'm sorry, forgive me for being like this, I can't even get into an elevator normally and she pressed the button and went down. Outside it was the height of summer, it was the World Cup football final and her father and his guests were laughing in the living room and the refrigerator was packed with beer and nobody noticed or worried about Christina's departure.



## Emiliya DVORYANOVA

(born 1958 in Sofia, Bulgaria) is a writer and musician. She graduated in piano performance at the Lyubomir Pipkov National School of Music. She continued her studies at Sofia University where she earned a doctoral degree in philosophy. At the moment she is associate professor in creative writing at New Bulgarian University.

Emiliya Dvoryanova (also spelled Emilia Dvorianova) is one of the most distinguished contemporary Bulgarian novelists. Although her first publications appeared after 1989, she does not belong to the so called Generation of 1990s, since her debut was somewhat belated. Her works offer an alternative to mainstream Bulgarian writing, which is preoccupied with the trivialities of everyday life. Critics tend to identify Marcel Proust and Thomas Mann as Dvoryanova's major influences, while she herself cites the medieval Bulgarian rhetoricians and the Old Church-Slavonic chants as her sources of inspiration. Because of the prevalence of female characters in her novels, many critics categorize her as a feminist author. While this approach is legitimate to a degree, it fails to recognize the distinctiveness of Dvoryanova's writing: she aims at overcoming the limits of the word by transforming the narrative into a self-reflexive texture in which language is subjected to the structuring principles of music and the fine arts. In a 2001 interview with Plamen Antov, Dvoryanova commented that the three novels and one novella she had published up to that time represent a continuous experiment with language.

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- 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.

## Book Awards

- 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.



## At the Doors of the Sea

Excerpt / Translated by Thomas Kitson and Valentina Izmirlieva

when I closed the gate behind me, it creaked annoyingly, alarmingly on the background of still air, flowers, grass, the droplets of dew down below on the soil, the patterned stones, something's always neglected, no way everything can be kept in order, and I set off for the building by the roundabout path that first followed the fence – a lattice of little rhomboids, woven one into another like the ones on the gate, and at eye level small sharp spikes – my gaze crept along the lacy surface until the fence vanished in the brush, it reminded me of something, but I couldn't think what, then the path turned, rounded the building and headed for the main entrance, facing the sea. I stopped for a moment to look at the façade, white, with high jutting windows and lattices on the balconies like the ones that enclosed the garden, it must have been built long ago and renovated recently, I thought, and headed for the entrance. In fact, it could just as well have been the exit, the plan of the building isn't clear, it's ideally symmetrical and on the other side, facing the park and the road, there's exactly the same entrance... seven broad steps between columns, glass doors, if you stand in front of one set of doors, you'll see through the transparent glass the opposite set, just as transparent, one direction of the world, the other direction... there's no way of knowing which is the exit, which

the entrance... I prefer to come in from the sea. I concentrated on the stone slabs and my steps, yes, no fear, at first, when I got back on my feet a month ago, I didn't dare take a step and that went on for days on end without any reason in the body, just in the soul, I walked unsteadily then, but these slabs are firm and I feel how my sandals fit me, comforting, then the steps in front of the entrance, the columns support a wide canopy, and a gong hanging up high between them, this gong must call somebody, when will it sound... Now, however, I have to pass by the doctor's office, that's what they advised me in Sofia, then I'll look around, feel the rhythm of life here, whether there is a rhythm, or whether I have to create it myself... can't do without rhythm... this gong here, when it sounds, creates rhythm... soon I'll figure it out.

at the reception desk in the foyer stood a little old bald man, I asked where the doctor's office was,

"oh, the doctor... you mean the doctor, ma'am? over there," he pointed into the open space and bent at the waist, "see him right away, of course, he's a very special man and always at your service, you just need to let him know in advance, to make an appointment..."

naturally, I *should* have known that I *would* have to make an appointment when there are so many people here, the little old man pointed at the three wide stripes on the wall behind him, one above the other, green, yellow, red – keys hanging over them, all rather motley, cheerful,

"you understand, don't you, dear lady, there are all kinds, green, yellow, red, and they bother him all the time, everyone wants to see him for absolutely no reason, just like that, because he's extraordinary,"

words sometimes thump in my ears like stones thrown from under a car's tires, the little old man is not all there, and I looked over the colored bands in order to figure out where I should hang my key, I would need to leave it, I tend to lose things... but some people can't shut up and I learned that one young lady stood for three hours in front of the office,

"no matter how much I tried to persuade her, she wouldn't have any of it, waited for him to take her in without any reason at all, young folks are like that,"

and a while before that another gentleman knocked at the door every minute for an hour – *knock!* – every minute – *knock!*, and then others... why is he telling me these things, his words knock one after another, and the little old man keeps strict watch and doesn't let people approach, even insisted on a partition and a locked door across the corridor, but the doctor wouldn't agree to it,

"leave your name and they'll call you when it's time to go, dear lady, that's why I'm here after all, bring all your problems to me... just your name and room number, ma'am, we'll let you know before this evening, we know about you here, believe me, we're thinking..."

his beady eyes were sparkling, a smile of false teeth made him look like an over-aged bell-boy, and while he swayed, he fiddled with the only buttoned button on his jacket, maybe he was bowing, I didn't understand what he meant by "we know about you," still, I gave my name and room number,

"I actually know, I know, ma'am... by this evening you'll have the time for your appointment, for your date..."

I thanked him and moved on, thank you without asking about the refectory, another stream of words might spurt out. There was lots of time before lunch, and it said in the brochure that they bring lunch to the rooms, something like room service... but not dinner, except when you're sick... that means everything's arranged so that I almost never need to leave my chaise longue on the balcony, only sometimes I'll go down to the sea, this is a calming thought, at the moment Ana set off, I felt uneasy, and at the same time wanted to be left alone, feelings are contradictory, desires all the more. I took the elevator to the fourth floor, then went along the corridor, my steps sink into the soft runner, red, the air-conditioning is on and everything resembles a luxury hotel, on the floor a maid with a cart is changing sheets, I can hear a vacuum somewhere, sound, silence, noises sink away here... before coming here, I told my daughter it was very expensive and would ruin me, but she convinced me: it's more important that you recover fully – from what?... here, by the way, they usually treat nerves, whatever that means, and if you leave out the special pool, the mud baths, and the doctors, the place looks like it's meant exclusively for rest and relaxation, I could have achieved the same thing by renting a little house by the sea and resting, that was my rejoinder to Ana – I didn't think I needed any doctors, I had enough – I should have told her: sorrow is troubling me, Ana, nostalgia... nothing more... I didn't dare, however, since I knew how she would counter me: *melancholy is a dangerous sadness*, plus she had already made up her mind, and I simply acquiesced. Lately I don't have the strength to put up a fight.



# Deyan ENEV

was born on August 11, 1960, in Sofia. He graduated from the First English Language School in Sofia and Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski with a bachelor's degree in Bulgarian Philology. He is married, and father of two.

Enev worked as a painter for the Cinema Center, graveyard-shift attendant at the Medical Academy Psychiatry Ward and at the Surgical Ward of the Fourth City Hospital, pressman at the military factory Komuna, and as a teacher. He has worked as a journalist for *Maritza*, *Novinar*, *Express*, *Otechestven Front*, *Sega*, and *Monitor*. He has over 2,000 journalistic publications – pieces of reporting, interviews, articles, essays, feuilletons. For two years he worked as a copywriter for the marketing agency Ogilvy & Mather. In 2010, he read lectures at SU St. Kliment Ohridski in Creative Writing. In 2012, he was a lecturer at the Fifth Annual Sozopol Fiction Seminars in Sozopol, organized by the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation. Currently, he is a columnist for the web portal *Kultura*.

Deyan Enev has sixteen published books.

## *Short Story Collections*   *Essay Collections*

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

*Horse Gospel* (1992)

*Manhunter* (1994) – won the annual fiction award of Hristo Botev Publishing House, and was translated in Norwegian in 1997

*The Slaughter of the Rooster* (1997)

*Hands or Tails* (1999, 2000, 2014) – Hristo G. Danov National Award for Fiction and the Annual Bulgarian Writers Union Prize

*Have Mercy on Us, Oh Lord* (2004) – Helikon Prize

*A Town Named Mendocino* (2009) – winner of Milosh Zypkov National Award and Helikon Prize and nominated for the Helikon Prize

*Seven Christmas Stories* (2009)

*The Bulgarian Lad from Alaska. Sofia Stories* (2011)

*Hemingway's Grandson* (2013)

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

*By Law of the Writer* (2015)

*A Nation of Hesychasts* (2010)

## *Portrait Collections*

*Men of the Pen* (2009)

## *Poetry Collections*

*Poems* (2012) – Nikolay Kanchev National Poetry Award

Enev was awarded the *Trud* newspaper Golden Wreath Award for short stories in 2006. In 2008, the Austrian Publishing House Deuticke released a collection of selected stories under the title *Circus Bulgaria*. The translation into German was done by Norbert Radow and Katrin Zemmrich. In August 2010, London-based Portobello Books published *Circus Bulgaria* in English (translation by Kapka Kassabova). The book made its way to the longlist of the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award two years in a row: 2010 and 2011.

## CIRCUS BULGARIA

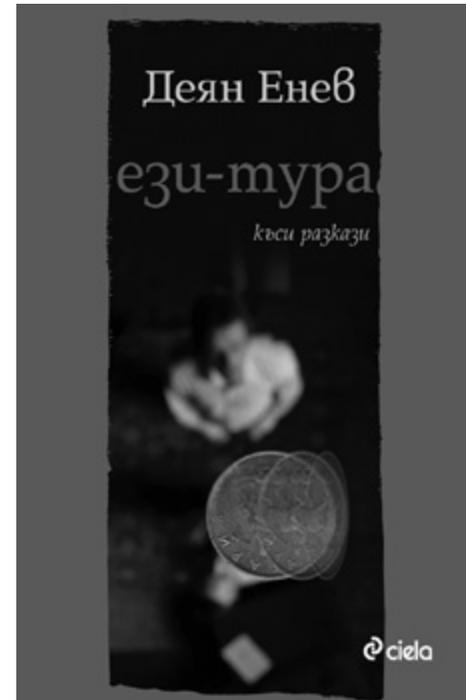
Review by Tibor Fischer, The Guardian

So I was rather looking forward to a bulletin from the frontline in Sofia, Deyan Enev's collection of short stories *Circus Bulgaria*. Born in 1960, Enev is old enough to have profound experiences of the old system, but has lived through 20 years of post-Soviet life. Originally published a few years ago in Bulgaria, the book's emphasis is on life after the changes, and how "democracy" (such as it is) and freedom don't equate to happiness and prosperity. The title story, "Circus Bulgaria" (a title open to all sorts of interpretations), sets the mood by relating how a desperate lion-tamer, down to his last lion, sells the beast so that both can survive the winter.

There are 50 stories in the collection, and many are so short they could easily fall into the category of flash fiction. Enev also has a taste for the mysterious or surreal ending, necessitating more than one reading to try to get a grip on the story (though, very often, rereading made the codas no clearer). Such oddities would be excellent for discussion in a reading group or a creative writing class, but I suspect that many readers will find several of these pieces too slippery for recreational purposes.

Take "The Return of the Prodigal Son." The narrator goes to visit his mother in hospital, then returns home, where he starts flicking through the family photo album. His brother, who has been away, walks in and announces he will be staying for a while. This is the last paragraph of the story: "In a few minutes, the room filled up with rats. They stood to attention, in thick tidy ranks, and their tails formed straight lines. Their lead eyes were fixed on my brother's. Their black bodies shivered. My brother said something incomprehensible and, screaming and squealing, the rats started jumping out of the window. When the last rat was gone, my brother rubbed his red eyes, sat on the bed and began to tell his story."

Several of the stories have these baffling endings, though there is at least one, "Rider Girl", which adheres to the classic Roald Dahl "twist in the tail" formula, and which will probably feature prominently in anthologies of erotic fiction.



## Circus Bulgaria

Excerpt / Translated by Kapka Kassabova

“I just don’t know what to do with the lion,” said Pacho the lion tamer to Pavarotti on a cold November day. “I might just shoot him and then it’ll be over.”

Pavarotti was a former colleague from their circus years. His name was Pavel, but everyone had called him Pavarotti at the circus, because he was a dreadful singer. He used to be a clown, but he had moved with the changing times and now he was a pub owner – if pub is what you’d call his tin shack in the outer suburb of Iliantsi, near the base of the former circus. Pacho often dropped in for a free drink and to brainstorm together.

“You’re stubborn,” Pavarotti said, “You must be nuts not to see which way the wind is blowing. There is no more circus art in Bulgaria, get this into your head! How many more years do you need to figure it out?”

“Pour me another one,” Pacho said. Pavarotti knew his friend had no money, so it was always on him. But everything had its limits. And anyway, Pacho got drunk on just two or three glasses. He was getting drunk now.

“You ask why I’m stubborn,” Pacho got heated up, “Because that’s what I do. Because I’m the best lion tamer in Bulgaria. Because without me, this art will die out.”

“So? Who gives a shit?” Pavarotti smiled his cruel clown’s smile. “I was the best clown too, and so what? You need to think about that proposal I told you about.”

Pacho felt he was getting plastered and got up. He put his cigarettes away in the pocket of his quilted old jacket, waved to Pavarotti, and stepped outside. A fine sharp snow was cutting across the air like razorblades, and the tamer pulled up his collar. Dead or alive, he had to find two kilos of meat for Caesar. And some food for himself too. Caesar was his family now. His daughters were in Spain, his son in Los Angeles. All three of them were spectacular circus artists – his daughters were acrobats, and his son a juggler.

He reached the wagon which still bore the faded sign “State Circus,” and next to it the more recently painted letters “Bulgaria.” He unlocked the padlock and went in. He’d spent his life in wagons like this. Caesar got up to greet him and rubbed his forehead on Pacho’s trousers. A handful of hairs hit the floor like sparks. Caesar had started going bald lately. Pacho sat on the bed and put his arms around the lion’s big head. He had to find a solution, but his head was all murky, and he felt sleepy and weak. The former circus base in Iliantsi was now entirely filled by warehouses. Only on Pacho’s patch of earth were there a couple of wagons and Caesar’s cage, covered with tarpaulin. During the coldest months, Pacho kept Caesar with him inside the wagon.

Pacho had to pull himself together. He had work ahead of him today: find meat for the lion, eat something, and have a training session. He also had to light up the stove because the nights were getting colder. The cognac still boomed in his chest and made him prone to speeches. He jumped to his feet.

“Now, look here, attentiion!”

The lion sat there and his yellow eyes looked at him with intent.

“I shall deliver my crowning speech. We have a lot of work today and yet I observe a complete and total lack of discipline. This cannot go on, is that clear? You, Caesar, haven’t eaten today. I take this into account and I sympathise. However, this doesn’t mean that we’ll skip training. You must train daily, I repeat, dai-ly, in order to be on top form. We can only take over the world if we are in top form. Right. Where was I? That’s right. Now, there is no connection between eating and training. Eating is eating, and training is training. Eating is optional, but training is not. Is that clear? Right. Now, I’ll smoke a cigarette because I’m tired of trying to talk sense into you. Then we’ll go to the cage and train.”



## Zdravka *EVTIMOVA*

was born in Bulgaria on July 24, 1959. She lives in Pernik, Bulgaria, and works as a literary translator from English, French and German.

Her short stories have appeared in literary magazines and short story anthologies in 32 countries in the world.

In 2015, her short story “Blood of a Mole” was included in the English textbooks for the high schools in Denmark.

Zdravka Evtimova’s short story “Seldom” was included in the anthology *Best European Fiction 2015*, Dalkey Archive Press, USA, 2015.

Her story “It’s Your Turn” was one of the ten best award-winning stories in the world short story competition on the topic UTOPIA-2005, Nantes, France. The story was included in the anthology *Utopia 2005. Dix auteurs du monde entier*, (Ten Authors from the Whole World).

Zdravka Evtimova’s short story “Vassil” was one of the ten short stories selected as winners in the world short story competition of Radio BBC, London, 2005.

**Books published in the USA:**

*Somebody Else*, short story collection, MAG Press, 2004; the book was nominated for Pushcart Prize 2005; the book won the 2005 award for best short story collection of MAG Press by an established author;

*God of Traitors*, novel, Bucks Publishing, 2008;

*Good Figure, Beautiful Voice*, short story collection, Asremari Books, 2008;

*Carts and Other Stories*, short story collection, Fomite Press, 2012;

*Time To Mow and Other Stories*, short story collection, All Things That Matter Press, 2012;

*SINFONIA BULGARICA* novel, (the Bulgarian title of the novel is *Thursday*), Fomite Books, 2014.

Many short story collections by Zdravka Evtimova have also been published in the UK, Canada, Greece, Israel, Macedonia, Italy and China.

**Books published in Bulgaria:**

*Stories against Loneliness*, short story collection, Narodna Mladezh Press, 1984, Southern Spring Prize for debut short story collection;

*A Tear Costs a Dime*, short story collection, Sluntse Publishing, 2000, Fiction Prize-2001 from *Vek-21* Newspaper;

*Your Shadow Was My Home*, Razvitie Corporation, 2000, one of the four first awards of equal value from Razvitie Corporation

*Thursday*, novel, Zhanet-45 Publishing, 2003, the literary prize for Best Fiction Work 2003 from the Union of the Bulgarian Writers;

*Blood of a Mole and Other Stories*, short story collection, Zhanet-45 Publishing, 2006, Anna Kamenova Fiction Prize 2006;

*The Arch*, novel, Ciela Press, 2007, nomination for a Book of Europe 2007

*Backbiting*, novel, Zhanet-45 Publishing, 2010;

*Stories from Pernik*, short story collection, Zhanet-45 Publishing, 2013, Balkanika 2014 Literary Prize for best book of fiction published in Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Turkey in the period 2013-2014; Blaga Dimitrova Literary Fiction Prize- 2015;

*The Same River*, novel, Zhanet-45 Publishing, 2015

## Blood of a Mole

Translated by Zdravka Evtimova

Few customers visit my shop. They watch the animals in the cages and seldom buy them. The room is narrow and there is no place for me behind the counter, so I usually sit on my old moth-eaten chair behind the door. Hours I stare at frogs, lizards, snakes and insects. Teachers come and take frogs for their biology lessons; fishermen drop in to buy some kind of bait; that is practically all. Soon, I'll have to close my shop and I'll be sorry about it, for the sleepy, gloomy smell of formalin has always given me peace and an odd feeling of home. I have worked here for five years now.

One day a strange small woman entered my room. Her face looked frightened and grey. She approached me, her arms trembling, unnaturally pale, resembling two dead white fish in the dark. The woman did not look at me, nor did she say anything. Her elbows reeled, searching for support on the wooden counter. It seemed she had not come to buy lizards and snails; perhaps she had simply felt unwell and looked for help at the first open door she happened to notice. I was afraid she would fall and took her by the hand. She remained silent and rubbed her lips with a handkerchief. I was at a loss; it was very quiet and dark in the shop.

"Have you moles here?" she suddenly asked. Then I saw her eyes. They resembled old, torn cobwebs with a little spider in the centre, the pupil.

"Moles?" I muttered. I had to tell her I never had sold moles in the shop and I had never seen one in my life. The woman wanted to hear something else – an affirmation. I knew it by her eyes; by the timid stir of her fingers that reached out to touch me. I felt uneasy staring at her.

"I have no moles," I said. She turned to go, silent and crushed, her head drooping between her shoulders. Her steps were short and uncertain.

"Hey, wait!" I shouted. "Maybe I have some moles." I don't know why I acted like this.

Her body jerked, there was pain in her eyes. I felt bad because I couldn't help her.

"The blood of a mole can cure sick people," she whispered. "You only have to drink three drops of it."

I was scared. I could feel something evil lurking in the dark.

"It eases the pain at least," she went on dreamily, her voice thinning into a sob.

“Are you ill?” I asked. The words whizzed by like a shot in the thick moist air and made her body shake. “I’m sorry.”

“My son is ill.”

Her transparent eyelids hid the faint, desperate glitter of her glance. Her hands lay numb on the counter, lifeless like firewood. Her narrow shoulders looked narrower in her frayed grey coat.

“A glass of water will make you feel better,” I said.

She remained motionless and when her fingers grabbed the glass her eyelids were still closed. She turned to go, small and frail, her back hunching, her steps noiseless and impotent in the dark. I ran after her. I had made up my mind.

“I’ll give you blood of a mole!” I shouted.

The woman stopped in her tracks and covered her face with her hands. It was unbearable to look at her. I felt empty. The eyes of the lizards sparkled like pieces of broken glass. I didn’t have any mole’s blood. I didn’t have any moles. I imagined the woman in the room, sobbing. Perhaps she was still holding her face with her hands. Well, I closed the door so that she could not see me, then I cut my left wrist with a knife. The wound bled and slowly oozed into a little glass bottle. After ten drops had covered the bottom, I ran back to the room where the woman was waiting for me.

“Here it is,” I said. “Here’s the blood of a mole.”

She didn’t say anything, just stared at my left wrist. The wound still bled slightly, so I thrust my arm under my apron. The woman glanced at me and kept silent. She did not reach for the glass bottle, rather she turned and hurried toward the door. I overtook her and forced the bottle into her hands.

“It’s blood of a mole!”

She fingered the transparent bottle. The blood inside sparkled like dying fire. Then she took some money out of her pocket.

“No. No,” I said.

Her head hung low. She threw the money on the counter and did not say a word. I wanted to accompany her to the corner. I even poured another glass of water, but she would not wait. The shop was empty again and the eyes of the lizards glittered like wet pieces of broken glass.

Cold, uneventful days slipped by. The autumn leaves whirled hopelessly in the wind, giving the air a brown appearance. The early winter blizzards hurled snowflakes against the windows and sang in my veins. I could not forget that woman. I’d lied to her. No one entered my shop and in the quiet dusk I tried to imagine what her son looked like. The ground was frozen, the streets were

deserted and the winter tied its icy knot around houses, souls and rocks.

One morning, the door of my shop opened abruptly. The same small grey woman entered and before I had time to greet her, she rushed and embraced me. Her shoulders were weightless and frail, and tears were streaking her delicately wrinkled cheeks. Her whole body shook and I thought she would collapse, so I caught her trembling arms. Then the woman grabbed my left hand and lifted it up to her eyes. The scar of the wound had vanished but she found the place. Her lips kissed my wrist, her tears made my skin warm. Suddenly it felt cosy and quiet in the shop.

“He walks!” The woman sobbed, hiding a tearful smile behind her palms. “He walks!”

She wanted to give me money; her big black bag was full of different things that she had brought for me. I could feel the woman had braced herself up, her fingers had become tough and stubborn. I accompanied her to the corner but she only stayed there beside the street-lamp, looking at me, small and smiling in the cold.

It was so cosy in my dark shop and the old, imperceptible smell of formalin made me dizzy with happiness. My lizards were so beautiful that I loved them as if they were my children.

In the afternoon of the same day, a strange man entered my room. He was tall, scraggly and frightened.

“Have you... the blood of a mole?” he asked, his eyes piercing through me. I was scared.

“No, I haven’t. I have never sold moles here.”

“Oh, you have! You have! Three drops... three drops, no more... My wife will die. You have! Please!”

He squeezed my arm.

“Please... three drops! Or she’ll die...”

My blood trickled slowly from the wound. The man held a little bottle and the red drops gleamed in it like embers. Then the man left and a little bundle of bank-notes rolled on the counter.

On the following morning a great whispering mob of strangers waited for me in front of my door. Their hands clutched little glass bottles.

“Blood of a mole! Blood of a mole!”

They shouted, shrieked, and pushed each other. Everyone had a sick person at home and a knife in his hand.



# Ludmila FILIPOVA

is one of Bulgaria's most popular contemporary authors. She is the author of the best-seller novels *Anatomy of Illusions* (2006), *Scarlet Gold* (2007), *Glass Butterflies* (2008), *The Parchment Maze* (2009), *Dante's Antichthon* (2010) and *The Anomaly* (2011), *Typo* (2012), *The Eye of the Sky* (2013), *The War of the Letters* (2014), and *A Journey to the World's End* (2015), which have become nationwide bestsellers and have been translated into several languages. Three of her novels are currently being developed into feature films.

In December 2011, Ludmila Filipova was named *Woman of the Year* in the category Culture and Art.

With her novels, Ludmila Filipova was nominated for the European literary contest *Prix du Livre Europeen 2008*, short-listed for the Bulgarian literary contest *Novel of the Year 2009*, and as the only foreign novel nominated for the American literary award *Hidden River 2009*.

Ludmila was born on Easter 1977. She graduated with a bachelor's degree from the Sofia Economic University with high honors and from the City University with an MBA in general management. Ludmila specialized in Creative writing (fiction) at Oxford University in 2009. She is a granddaughter of the last Socialist primer minister Grisha Filipov. Moreover, Ludmila works as a TV presenter in the most popular TV talk shows at the national bTV called *High*

*Hills*. She is also a columnist for the most popular Bulgarian newspaper *24 Hours*. Years ago she worked as an editor in chief of *Media&Marketing* magazine and as a journalist for *BusinessWeek Bulgaria*.

## THE WAR OF THE LETTERS

### Synopsis

“It has been said that great deeds are kept in the hearts of men, and miracles - in God's ...”

### *The War of the Letters*

This is a novel based on the newest historical findings about the creation of the *Cyrillic script* – the third major alphabet in the World. The story is both previously unexplored and culturally significant, a moving chronicle of a people defending its written heritage in a time when every deviation from the accepted Latin, Greek or Hebrew scripts was punishable by death.

The year is 927. In a dark dungeon lives a malformed pagan, an educated exile who will tell this story. A story about the calling that a few lucky men are able to discover. About the choice between love and the fate to fulfill your duties. About a sacred secret that is kept in the heart of a great nation. A story about the sacraments of the Cyrillic alphabet and its hidden strength.

The story begins with the youngest son of the great Bulgarian Tsar Simeon – Bayan – who studies at the Magnaura School. Forced to suffer the ridicules and the arrogance of the Byzantine aristocrats, he proudly holds the title Bulgarian prince and lives for the stolen moments in Maria's presence. The granddaughter of the Emperor Lakapin is secretly in love with the young Bulgarian. She knows that this is an impossible love – sooner or later her life will be exchanged for peace. She loves him despite everything. Until the day when the blade of the Emperor slashes an immense stone statue. In a split second their world falls apart. On the same day Tsar Simeon dies and his son Peter ascends the throne. Weak willed, dedicated to books and thoughts about God, he has no will to prevent the ambitions of his mother, who offers to Roman Lakapin an agreement for peace, in which Maria is the stake. But nothing can stop Bayan from defending his love. And the fight for it will lead him to discover an astonishing secret, which can create wonders. The secret of the letters. A legend about the blood that flows through our veins. About the battle and the will of a nation that is ready to be itself, to be strong, to be the Bulgarian nation.



## The War of the Letters

Excerpt / Translated by Villy Filipova-Ellinger

### Chapter 1

*An I – in the depths of unseeing darkness*

I was told that a chronicle of one's life should begin with the proper praise to God, a laudation of His kingdom and His obedient children. I beg yours and His forgiveness that I have chosen to forgo that part. I don't believe in God. If He truly existed, what monster must He be? For why else would He discard me in this pit since I was but an infant and leave me here to suffer in the loneliness of undeserved exile? One day they would call me Curhead.

My mother – I never knew her. I spend my days in the dark maw, beneath the world inhabited by men. I hide from them, for my father has often warned me – should others see me they will surely kill me. I have no face, nor a healthy body, nor eyes to gaze with. I can't see, but I can sense. Time breathes through my soul, the cold grips and stiffens my skin as the underground moisture seeps through. The shifting currents of life above ground reach my ears. The smell of mold and parchment wafts to my nose while I write. Sightless, I grope with the rest of my senses. I guard the script of letters and collect stories. I don't know why I do this. Some say I resemble a dog, to others I'm just a beast. People fear those who are different – I can't blame them for that.

My father tried to instill his faith in God in me. He told me that I was born at the very time when the holy man called Naum died after bringing the alphabet back to the lands of Bulgaria. It was the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, my father said, when the sun was reborn and all the gods too. It was the longest night of the year before the days would begin to grow again. For thousands of years people believed that God was born on that very date, a time called Christmas in our lands. But people often believe such things out of fear, unable to accept the fact that tomorrow might simply snuff out their lives like a flame in the wind.

I am blind, but sometimes I can see the flame. I have no fear. I was born already dead. I need no delusions, no eternity and no God.

I am insignificant. The future and all that it will bring to alter the course of history is the key. And so my story begins on the day when my father disappeared. In those dark times I didn't even suspect what would soon come to pass. I didn't know what my father looked like, I just felt his presence in the written symbols. Perhaps the same way that he sensed me. The two of us shared little else besides the strings of letters we arranged into words. So when he was no longer with me all I could think to do was write. It was my way of searching for him, for myself. The only way I knew that we existed. He had left me plenty of dried parchment and ink for the task.

These were times of important events. The earthen pit that was my home was hidden beneath the floor boards of a church. Monks and statesmen strode above, discussing the fateful tides of the Bulgarian Empire. The formidable kingdom of the Bulgarians stretching far and wide between three seas was ruled by the powerful Tsar Simeon. His army, protected by unseen magic as some claimed, had never lost in battle. The Tsar himself, a tireless and capable leader, continued his own father's work – to spread and affirm the Bulgarian written word and the Christian faith.

### Chapter 2 *The Living*

Bayan

Bayan spurred his horse into a breakneck gallop toward the Bosphorus.

The harder he rode, his fatigue growing, the more relentlessly he whipped the exhausted animal. He didn't stop to rest, determined to keep going until he blacked out and fell from the saddle or until he reached Constantinople.

His thoughts spun through realms of time somehow always ending up staring right into his father's dead eyes or Maria's hazy visage.

Did she wait for him? Could he even hope? He was unsure of her feelings for

him because she had never openly expressed them. All he knew for certain was what he felt – an emotion beyond anything else he had ever experienced in life.

He reached Constantinople at sunrise after two days of hard riding. He rushed up the hill straight toward the palace. During the two years Bayan had spent studying at the Magnaura most of the guardsmen had come to recognize him. None found his arrival suspicious until he headed toward the imperial wing, shoving the sentries out of his way. He tried to neutralize them without causing them serious injuries. The last guard barred his way, so Bayan stabbed him in the thigh. The man dropped to the ground with a grunt of pain.

Bayan threw open the doors and flew into Maria's quarters. He found the princess gazing despondently out of the window. At the sound of the intrusion she spun around, her body tense, but as soon as she saw the Bulgarian prince her eyes lit up and a smile blossomed on her face. She had heard the screams and commotion outside, but he was the last person she had expected to find at her doorstep.

Bayan froze at the threshold, taking in the beloved features. Maria's smile quickly faded into a look of worry. Her delicate fingers nervously brushed away a lock of hair that had come loose over her eyes.

Bayan, covered in dirt from the road, his face scratched, his shirt torn and stained with blood, read the fear in her eyes. This might be the last time they were together, he realized. Determined, he took a step toward her, then stopped abruptly as though hitting an invisible wall.

"My Beauty..." he whispered. He was the only one who called her that. The tension in Maria's shoulders softened.

Bayan raised a hand to touch her but felt his muscles tremble from fatigue and his ill-hidden excitement. There were so many things he wanted to say all at once, to hug her and kiss her. Instead, he clenched his jaw, furious at his own awkwardness. How long had he yearned for this very moment? Yet now when it had come to pass, he just stood there weak and shaking. His father's unexpected death and the last testament that had made his brother, Peter, heir to the throne, his mother's threat to wed Maria to Peter and to put her out of Bayan's reach forever, all of this had strained and branded each fiber of his being. The mad dash to Constantinople and the fight with the palace guards had drained the remainder of his strength.

"Boyan?" uttered Maria. It was how they called him here, in Constantinople. In Bulgaria his name was pronounced 'Bayan'. The princess' voice shook slightly. Her gentle vulnerability made him want to embrace her even more.



## Milena FUCHEDJIEVA

is one of Bulgaria's most popular writers, screenwriters and columnists. She is the director of two documentaries and her plays, *Zen Porno* and *Krizis*, have been staged in Bulgaria and Los Angeles. Milena lived and worked in the US for many years. She is also the creator and head writer of one of the most popular Bulgarian TV drama series, *Seven Hours Difference*.

*White Niggah* is her first book of essays on the immigrant experience in America, followed by a book of short stories, *NoHannah* (Ciela, 2004). *Night Project* (Altera, 2006) is a collection of poems and photographic self-portraits. *Kheper: Little Ida's Colors* (Ciela, 2007) is a horror-fantasy novel. *I, the Blogger* (Enthusiast, 2010) is a collection of the best writing from her widely popular blog.

In November 2014, her second novel, *Sex and Communism* (Enthusiast), debuted and became an instant bestseller and one of the most talked about books of the year. It remained in the top-10 list of most sold Bulgarian novels for three consecutive months.

As of 2010, Milena Fuchedjieva lives and works in Sofia, Bulgaria. As a teenager she spent three years in Paris, France, with her parents. Her body of work carries influences from French and American culture, combined with her experience while living in Communist Bulgaria.

## SEX AND COMMUNISM

### Synopsis

There is no love without freedom. This is the not-so-subtle message of *Sex and Communism*, told through the communist “glamour” and constant paranoia of young Lola’s family, the Karamihovs.

Set in Sofia and Paris between 1945 and 1982, the book tells the story of the impossible marriage between two people who come from the dominant, warring elites of Communist Bulgaria – the ruling red bourgeoisie and the despised capitalist elite, mostly exterminated by the Communist regime. Lola, a teenage red “princess” coming of age caught between these two worlds, unknowingly carries the burden of a dark, hidden moment in her grandmother’s past and inadvertently brings danger to herself and her parents.

“Whatever Lola wants, Lola gets,” but not quite for the Bulgarian Lola. Under the privileged life she enjoys in Sofia and Paris lies hidden an unattainable longing which seems to be for love, but is actually for freedom.

Lola’s mother, Maroussia, is sent to Paris as a cultural attaché in the Bulgarian Embassy. After the family returns to Bulgaria, Lola never recovers from losing the newly found freedom she enjoyed in a posh Parisian lyceum, and the short-lived connection with French liberal society irreparably damages her parents’ relationship.

The glamorous Maroussia and Stefan fall out of love under the invisible pressure of the Communist Secret Police. Lola’s mother is forced to spy on Lola’s father, Stefan – the price she must pay for her career. On their return to Bulgaria, Lola refuses to adapt to the strict and severe Communist rules in school, and as she witnesses the “clash of civilizations” that leads to the dissolution of her parents’ marriage, she does what most teenagers do – she rebels.

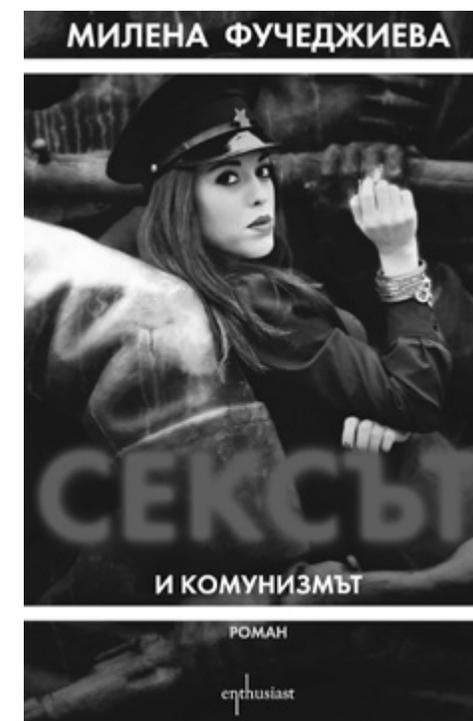
Love, sex and rebellion mix in a dangerous and self-destructive way, which Lola uses as a means to escape from her oppressive reality. Fear of the Party subjugates society. Stefan teaches Lola to despise the Communists, but the State Security is everywhere, even among Lola’s lovers.

Meanwhile, a dangerous and powerful man, Orlin Kolev, the Foreign Minister of Bulgaria, is obsessively prying into the Karamihovs family’s private life, until Maroussia agrees to become his lover – a calculated decision to promote her career and protect her family. Kolev is an elegant and seductive man in a high position, with the power to decide the course of the Karamihovs’ lives.

True love is impossible in a totalitarian society.

## Sex and Communism

Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel



### Chapter One

1977, Sofia, Rakovski Street

Lola’s Indian skirt swung freely about her long legs, and the gentle touch of the cloth made her forget everything bad that had happened at the French High School. With her every step, her breasts shifted beneath her thin blouse, she liked going bra-less, she enjoyed sowing unrest amidst the morons on the street. She had the most beautiful breasts in all of Sofia, if not all of Bulgaria, if not all of Eastern Europe, if not the whole world, even. Her hair was a wave that stopped at her ass – far too high to be covered over. Her grayish-blue eyes gazed out coldly and injuriously, she walked with her back straight, never quite distracted enough so as not to know what was happening on the street around her. Talismans hung from her neck, sometimes she wore black clogs or platform sandals; in the winter, her boots reached at least to her knees, while the summer was about espadrilles. She was fifteen when she realized her power over men, without needing any explanations whatsoever on their part. When striking up a conversation with her, no one ever looked her in the eye.

She didn't know what a sex symbol was, but she did know what *Playboy* was. One day she had found the little key to the locked drawer of her father's desk, where she found an old issue of the magazine. Lola knew *Playboy* was banned as pornography, but she had no idea that the magazine had been founded in 1953, only nine years before she was born in Communist Bulgaria, the same year that Winston Churchill had won the Nobel Prize for literature, Stalin had died, and tobacco workers in Bulgaria had declared a strike that was brutally crushed, killing nine. Lola was born nine years later and had no idea that anything like that had ever happened in Bulgaria. Life in downtown Sofia seemed completely calm.

She lived in an atmosphere spun of rumors and fear of rumors. Officially, nothing was ever said about sex anywhere, as if no one ever did it. Lola and her girlfriends at school spoke in insinuations, just as they spoke at home. There seemed to be strict boundaries and everything not designated as "permitted by the Party" was punishable and qualified as vice, pornography, perversion, deviation. Pornography existed only in the unjust Western world, where women were treated as goods, and also in the private collections of the party leaders, who stockpiled pornographic magazines so as to study the imperialist enemy's weaknesses. That's what she'd heard from her parents. But that didn't stop her from walking down Rakovski Street, thinking about having sex with her new boyfriend. Sex was also something new, something unfamiliar and exciting.

Over the summer she'd met the son of the Mongolian head-of-state, Yumjaagiin Tsendenbal, who bore the typical Mongolian name of Slava Tsendenbal. Head over heels in love with Lola, Slava Tsendenbal had hung around the bar of the resort complex where she was staying in hopes that someday she would deign to let him take her to the disco at the Central Committee's hotel in Golden Sands. He was an ugly Mongolian with coke-bottle glasses, his chauffeur was always waiting in the luxurious black Russian Chaika parked in front of the complex, but Lola didn't pay him any attention whatsoever. Legend had it that the Mongolian head-of-state had an enormous collection of pornography. As far as Lola was concerned, you could tell that just by the way the young Tsendenbal looked at her. Yes, she was different, and no, she had no intention of becoming a Mongolian princess.

Under communism, women were respected as *drugarki* or "comrades" and Lola quickly realized that she would never fit the description of a *drugarka*. Her self-esteem as something closer to the enemy than to a comrade, as well as the power her breasts held over men, was built on what she experienced daily on the street. Sofia's sidewalks were in perfect condition, but when she went out on the street, men started tripping all over themselves in their obsessive desire to have her.

It struck her as strange that in America, famous actors from the movies were "stars," while in Bulgaria they were "the people's artists." Except for the stars in the sky, all the Bulgarian stars were as red as the Russian ones and were most numerous in the cemeteries, where instead of crosses, they adorned the peaks of little red wooden pyramids. Beneath them some *drugar* or *drugarka* rested in peace. Walking down Rakovska, Lola felt like a star from that other, forbidden world, not like a "people's artist." She was a slice of juicy red bon file from a good family, who strolled along a specific urban route that never strayed from the center of Sofia. Every man who had met her during the summer of 1977 had desired her not as a *drugarka*, but as what Western feminists at the same moment were calling a "piece of meat." Her mother had told her what it meant to be a feminist – a woman who went bra-less and who wasn't against having a slight mustache. Lola thought with satisfaction that she was a semi-feminist because of the bra business. She had been warned not to be a piece of meat.

The comrades' drool trailed after Lola, who gazed at them contemptuously while wondering what it would be like to be a *drugarka* in nylon pantyhose beneath which your unshaven – and not for feminist reasons – pubes could be seen, squashed into black clouds. Her mother was also not like the *drugarki* who on official holidays donned their polyester suits with the armpits hardened by sweat and on whose heads towered complex constructions of backcombed hair, petrified with hair spray that was strong enough to patch a blown tire. To Lola, these *drugarki* looked like a female red army that cooked, cleaned, did the laundry, washed the dishes and went to work. In the evening, they set and cleared the table, while the *drugari* sat in front of the TV watching new reports about the latest five-year-plan completed, of course, ahead of schedule.

On March 8, International Women's Day, Lola's father would bring her mother an exquisite bouquet of white roses, accompanied by a short speech in which he mockingly explained that on that day, all women were equal to men. After which he would turn to Lola and tell her that this holiday had been thought up by the comrades, having no clue that it was actually invented by the American Socialist Party. And that she should remember two things: first, that she was equal to men every day of the year, and second, that she should never go to a restaurant on March 8. The waiters behaved atrociously because they had the upper hand in that situation, but also because on that day, when all inhibitions were thrown to the wind in the name of equality, every man dragged his own or someone else's wife out to dinner. The night of March 8 was filled with people staggering and vomiting on the streets.

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## Vasil Georgiev

was born on July 5, 1975. He has a Ph.D. in Law and works as a lawyer and lecturer on Law Studies. He lives in Sofia.

He is relatively new to the literary scene. He was first published in 2009, but in just a few years he managed to establish himself as one of the most original and distinctive voices in Bulgarian literature. His books have been nominated for and awarded the most prestigious literary prizes in Bulgaria. His short story collection *Buddhist Beach* (2009) was nominated for the Helikon Prize. *Street Dweller. Stories about the Sofia Streets* (2010) was nominated for the Hristo G. Danov Award. *Degrad*, another collection of short stories, won the Helikon Prize in 2011. Georgiev's Novel *Apparatus* received the Novel of the Year Award for 2014.

“Kiryak from Tolstoy” is a short story published in the short story collection *Degrad* in 2011. The main character, Kiryak, is writing from a fake Facebook profile with his mother, pretending that he is 70-year-old suitor. Thus, Kiryak controls his mother's personal life because he is afraid that she could marry once again.



### DEGRAD

*Degrad* is a collection of thirteen jarring stories, which Vasil Georgiev has managed to tell in a way that is simultaneously surrealistic, funny, urban, social, romantic, nostalgic, even scandalous.

The story collection *Degrad* was awarded one of the most prestigious Bulgarian literary awards, the 2011 Helikon Prize for contemporary Bulgarian literature. It will be published in German in the fall of 2015.

## Kiryak from Tolstoy

*Excerpt / Translated by Zoya Marincheva*

Now is my turn to cut to a story I read in a book by Alexander Velikov, my favorite author, who is also quite an expert on Communism. In his research on the idols of Socialist living, he explains that Communism, besides subsuming the religious wedding and burial rituals with civil ones, invented a gastronomical pantheon for the purposes of undermining faith in Jesus and the saints (in their turn, representing adaptations of the pantheons of various polytheistic belief systems). Communism, according to Velikov, chose salami and sausage products as the material projection of the old cults.

That was possible, because Communism, besides being a cruel one-party-system-based society, was exclusively a hungry society. The main goal of the comrades rising from the rabble was to give bread to the people. Bread, as the basic prerequisite for the masses' subsistence and a major engine for their

development, is on par with the Word in Christianity, the initial matter, or per the Communist terminology, the base.

Built on materialistic foundations, Communism pushed that idea a notch further. The old gods, or respectively, saints, had to make way for their replacements. The new gods could be created under conditions of controlled deficit, begetting expectations within the populace that were to be matched with supreme desire and deification. That wasn't a difficult task in a society, in which even saying the word "salami" in public would cause certain discomfort. The Socialist aspirational pyramid was topped with lukanka dry sausage and soujouk dry sausage, installed by the Communists as the two sublime deities of the Socialist gastronomical pantheon. These were the yin and yang of the ultimate culinary experience, the Jesus and the Mother of God of the gastronomical Socialist ideal.

"Do you remember," I ask her, "that female rock singer Milena (older people wouldn't just say 'Milena'), who sings, 'He is lying, the dirtbag, he's gorging himself on lukanka.'" I add that to illustrate the esoteric status of this particular type of dry sausage.

"Notice," I say, "in those times, both the lukanka and the soujouk cost 12 leva, like the 12 Olympian gods, the 12 apostles, the 12 animal cycles from the calendar of the proto-Bulgarians." I know just a few facts about that calendar, but some website on the proto-Bulgarians comes to my rescue, since I know that the good rhetorician usually needs 3 examples to support his thesis.

As the ultimate deities, Lukanka and Soujouk created and arranged the entire salami industry. Zakuska, Servilat, Bourgas and Shpek varieties were the sons of these initial creatures, costing nine or ten leva and harboring the ultimate divine spark of pure lukanka and soujouk, only containing a little bit more bacon and less wisdom due to their shorter maturation period. Later, they made poached salami, hamburger salami, chicken salami and so on with less and less divine matter in them, till finally the world of delicacies bottomed out at the chthonic depths of chitterlings, souse and tripe – disgusting, yet much tastier than the First Ever Bread, for which the Communists fought and triumphed. Enjoy, comrades!

While I am searching for a somewhat meaningful continuation in support of my story that is becoming increasingly dumb towards its end, at 2:23 pm, she says, "How about we meet at six o'clock by the bear on Eagles Bridge?"



## Georgi GOSPODINOV

(1968) is a poet, writer and playwright.

His *Natural Novel* is published in 23 languages including English, German, Italian, and most recently Icelandic, and is praised by the New Yorker, NY Times, Village Voice, etc. Gospodinov's latest books, *The Invisible Crises* (2013, essays, Zhanet 45) and *And All Turned Moon* (2013, short stories, Zhanet 45), were bestselling books in Bulgaria. His play, *The Apocalypse Comes at 6 pm*, had its US premiere in 2014 at the Single Carrot Theatre, Baltimore.

Gospodinov's new novel, *The Physics of Sorrow* (2012, Zhanet 45) was awarded The Novel of the Year Prize in Bulgaria. It is translated in Italian, German, French, English, etc. In 2014, the book was finalist for four international prizes: Premio Strega Europeo, Premio von Rezzori, Haus der Kulturen der Welt Preis, Berliner Bruecke Preis. The novel has been widely reviewed in Europe and the US. "This book is madness... extraordinary and restless" (Berliner Zeitung). According to the New Yorker, "As Gospodinov conceives it, the Bulgarian word *tuga* (... sorrow) is, like Pamuk's *hüzün* or Nabokov's *toska*..."

**Books translated into:**

**English**

*Physics of Sorrow*, Open Letter Books, translated by Angela Rodel, USA, 2015

*And Other Stories*, Northwestern University Press, 2007

*Natural Novel*, Dalkey Archive Press, translated by Zornitsa Hristova, 2005

**German**

*Physik der Schwermut*, Droschl Verlag, aus dem Bulgarischen Alexander Sitzmann, Graz, 2014

*Kleines morgendliches Verbrechen*, Droschl Verlag, aus dem Bulgarischen Valeria Jaeger, Uve Kolbe, Alexander Sitzmann, Graz, 2010

*Natuerlicher Roman*, Droschl, aus dem Bulgarischen Alexander Sitzmann Graz, 2007

*Gaustín oder Der Mensch mit den vielen Namen*, Wieser Verlag, aus dem Bulgarischen Alexander Sitsmann Wien, 2004

*Die Apokalypse kommt um 6 Uhr abends*, aus dem Bulgarischen von Henrike Schmidt, Henschel Schauspiel, 2014

**French**

*Physique de la Melancolie*, Traduit du bulgare par Marie Vrinat-Nikolov, Paris: Intervalles, 2015

*L'alphabet des femmes*, Traduit du bulgare par Marie Vrinat-Nikolov Paris: Arlea, France, 2003, 2014

*Un roman naturel*, Traduit du bulgare par Marie Vrinat-Nikolov, Paris: Editions Phebus, France, 2002



**THE PHYSICS OF SORROW**

*Synopsis*

*We am*, says a boy speaking from an ancient underground labyrinth, a cellar at the end of World War II, a basement apartment in the 1970/80s, an old bomb shelter tomorrow. This is a novel about the empathy and its vanishing, about the hard price of the ability to multiply yourself, about the Minotaurs locked inside us, about the elementary particles of sorrow. A novel in which the Minotaur meets Higgs boson. A novel with interweaving corridors, digressions and rooms mixing past and present, myth and document for the one who has to come – postapocalyptic reader, God or snail.

In the beginning, a lonely Eastern-European boy from the late communist regime times embeds himself in the stories of his grandfather who was a forgotten child in the Great War and soldier in World War II. Children's empathy goes through the walls of unspoken words and enters the hidden corridors of the past. They send him far back into the scared, abandoned and locked-up child of antiquity, the Minotour. A new reading of the well-known myth with an unexpected inversion of viewpoints. Loneliness and obsession with abandonment mark the protagonist's entire life thereafter. He gives voice to all the lives and living things (humans and animals) he carries within himself. In this sense, the novel has an intrinsic ecological and even eco-emphatic drive.

As he grows up, the one-time boy is faced with the inevitable loss of his powers of empathy, which he compensates for with ever-stranger collections, a personal time capsule, a survival kit for all sorts of apocalypses. His old obsession – “The Minotaur Complex” – is complimented by a new “Noah Complex” – an urge to gather the stories of the living and the perishable as the only means of putting off the end. Yet, his personal utopia clashes with antiutopian versions of present and future.

If *Natural Novel* was a “machine for stories” (*Le Courier*), in *Physics of Sorrow* the machine is kicked into high gear.

# The Physics of Sorrow

*Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel*

## Prologue

I was born at the end of August 1913 as a human being of the male sex. I don't know the exact date. They waited a few days to see whether I would survive and then put me down in the record. That's what they did with everyone. Summer work was winding down, they still had to harvest this and that from the fields, the cow had calved, they were fussing over her. The Great War had started. I sweated through it right alongside all the other childhood illnesses, chicken pox, measles, and so on.

I was born two hours before dawn like a fruit fly. I'll die this evening after sundown.

I was born on January 1, 1968, as a human being of the male sex. I remember all of 1968 in detail from beginning to end. I don't remember anything of the year we're in now. I don't even know its number.

I have always been born. I still remember the beginning of the Ice Age and the end of the Cold War. The sight of the dying dinosaurs (in both epochs) is one of the most unbearable things I have seen.

I haven't been born yet. I am forthcoming. I am minus seven months old. I don't know how to count that negative time in the womb. I am as big as an olive, weighing a gram and a half. They still don't know my sex. My tail is gradually retracting. The animal in me is taking leave, waving at me with its vanishing tail. Looks like I've been chosen for a human being. It's dark and cozy here, I'm tied to something that moves.

I was born on September 6, 1944, as a human being of the male sex. Wartime. A week later my father left for the front. My mother's milk dried up. A childless auntie wanted to take me in and raise me, but they wouldn't give me up. I cried whole nights from hunger. They gave me bread dipped in wine as a pacifier.

I remember being born as a rose bush, a partridge, as ginkgo biloba, a snail, a cloud in June (that memory is brief), a purple autumnal crocus near Halensee, an early-blooming cherry frozen by a late April snow, as snow freezing a hoodwinked cherry tree...

We am.

(...)

## The Bread of Sorrow

I see him clearly. A three-year-old boy. He has fallen asleep on an empty flour sack, in the yard of the mill. A heavy bee buzzes close above him, making off with his sleep.

The boy opens his eyes just a crack, he's still sleepy, he doesn't know where he is.

I open my eyes just a crack, I'm still sleepy, I don't know where I am. Somewhere in the no man's land between dream and day. It's afternoon, precisely that timelessness of late afternoon. The steady rumbling of the mill. The air is full of tiny specks of flour, a slight itching of the skin, a yawn, a stretch. The sound of people talking can be heard, calm, monotone, lulling. Several carts stand unyoked, half-filled with sacks, everything is sprinkled with that white dust. A donkey grazes nearby, his leg fettered with a chain.

Sleep gradually recedes completely. That morning in the darkness they had come to the mill with his mother and three sisters. He had wanted to help with the sacks, but they wouldn't let him. Then he had fallen asleep. They're surely ready to go by now, they've finished everything without him. He gets up and looks around. They are nowhere to be seen. Now here come the first steps of fear, still imperceptible, quiet, merely a suspicion that is rejected immediately. They're not here, but they must be inside or on the other side of the mill, or they're sleeping in the shade under the cart.

The cart isn't there, either. That light-blue cart with a rooster painted on the back.

And then the fear wells up, filling him, just like when they fill the little pitcher at the well, the water surges, pushing the air out and overflowing. The stream of fear is too strong for his three-year-old body and it fills up quickly, soon he will have no air left. He cannot even burst into tears. Crying requires air, crying is a long, audible exhalation of fear. But there is still hope. I run inside the mill, here the noise is very loud, the movements hasty, two white giants pour grain into the mill's mouth, everything is swathed in a white fog, the enormous spider webs in the corners are heavy with flour, a ray of sunlight passes through the high, broken windows and in the length of that beam the titanic dust battle can be seen. His mother isn't here. Nor any of his sisters. A hulking man stooped under a sack almost knocks him over. They holler at him to go outside, he's in the way.

Mommy?

The first cry, it's not even a cry, it ends in a question mark.

Moommy?



## Katerina HAPSALI

was born in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. After graduating with a Bachelor's degree in Economics and Spanish Language from Ohio Wesleyan University, she returned to Bulgaria and completed a Master's degree in Philosophy at Sofia University. For the past fifteen years, she has worked actively as a press and radio journalist with some of the most distinguished media in her home country. She was the first editor-in-chief of the Bulgarian edition of *Harper's BAZAAR* magazine.

Katerina Hapsali is currently working on her Ph.D. in Philosophy at Sofia University.

*Greek Coffee* is her first novel.



### GREEK COFFEE

#### Synopsis

A fatal car crash with a Greek businessman overturns the life of his young widow – a Bulgarian journalist. The raw truth has surfaced. What follows is a daring plunge into the depths of ancestral history, from which she (Katerina, the wife, the self-purifying woman) tries to wring out the strength to cope with the pain. This is just the plot framework of the novel *Greek Coffee*. Interweaving the autobiographical and the fictional, the historical and the intimate, the storyline boldly dissolves the layers of time and explores buried primal forces, unresolved conflicts, ancient stereotypes. *Greek Coffee* is, in fact, a story about the Balkans, a peninsula

criss-crossed with boundaries, which unite as ambiguously as they separate... History challenges them mercilessly, throwing into absurd turmoil personal stories, national identities, archetypes, unwavering men and women torn by passion, proud gestures thrusting out of the scars of old wounds. But, above all, it is a story about the boundaries within us, inside our conscience, the ones that continuously defend their territory.

*Greek Coffee* is a brilliantly written novel. Its fragmented structure breaks up the chronology of tales large and small, virtuosically fusing a multitude of voices, which pass through time and space unhindered, invigorating the present. It is a parable, sung as if from the womb – the sacred confession of a mother to her son, who will continue not only the thread of life, but also that of the story. Most importantly, however, *Greek Coffee* is a modern novel, in which vulnerability is fearlessly revealed, inciting reflection and urging discourse about the Balkan destiny of being connected.

## Greek Coffee

*Excerpt / Translated by Velina Minkova*

“Siko, Chroni, siko!”

Get up, Chroni, get up...

That’s what your grandmother kept on wailing in the small, stuffy room.

She wept with despair and rage. She looked suddenly old and insurmountably alone. Despite the dozens of figures of people, immobilized in the heavy air, steeped with the sweet fragrance of incense.

I will never forget this very specific fragrance. Formalin and flowers.

“Siko, Chroni, siko! Why are you doing this to me?”

That’s what your grandmother kept screaming as she threw herself onto the open coffin. She covered your father’s heavily made-up face with kisses, stroked his unexpectedly grey hair. A few days earlier I had seen a young man off to work. Death, or possibly the encounter with it, had made him at least twenty years older.

The village women would haul Demetra up and drag her back to sit on the small couch beside your aunt and your grandfather, who was stupefied with agony. Just so she could get up a minute later and go back to kissing your father.

That’s how I found them, your Greek family. Arranged next to each other along the cheap old couch as if on display. Destitute, flattened – by the grief, by the heat, the saturating Greek heat, by the looks of the people, whose sympathy alternated with a dark foretaste of festivity.

The village of Neos Stavros had never seen such a funeral. At least the villagers couldn’t remember one like it. And they remembered a lot. Even though they didn’t like to talk.

A funeral with four bishops and hundreds of wreaths. With indecently expensive cars and busloads of construction workers.

Siko, Chroni, siko....

Your father, covered with flowers, his face blue, his hair – grey, did not get up. And never, ever again would his unparalleled chuckle resound. Nonetheless, that very day, the one willed on me to be the worst day of my life, I had the stinging feeling that he would get up. Your dad liked surprises. Three years earlier, he had given me an engagement ring just a few days after we’d first met... We sat in a smoke-filled Indian restaurant full of drunken Brits, somewhere around Varna. While I was busy with the order, your father dragged over from

goodness knows where an off-key gypsy band, telling them to sing only “Miss Katerina.” “Pretty miss Katerina,” he sang, ardently, alluringly out-of-tune. And every time the chorus ended, he asked me in a sly, yet childlike way, “Lav, weel you merri me?”

I was just laughing – it was funny, but sweet – and the gypsies would pick up their instruments time and again, while the English tourists applauded. They obviously didn’t get the fact that the gypsies were playing one and the same song.

After the seventeenth time, however, Polychronis Georgiou Salis grabbed my frail shoulder, emaciated by dieting, and said in his incomparable Bulgarian: “Look hya. This is the lastime I propoz. Eef you don’t answer me now, I weel stop. I weel never ask you egein!”

“Yes,” I said to him, before I could block the words. “I’ll marry you.”

Your father kissed me. A brief, cheerful kiss, with no excess drama or frenzied passion. I’d already said “yes.” There was no reason for him to trample his male dignity one more time. The way they saw it in Neos Stavros.

“Well, then, this calls for a song... Eh, Lorenzo, do you know the song ‘Miss Katerina?’”

Your father was that kind of man. He had a strange, yet seductive charm. He could get out of any situation with his grin and temperament. And yes, for some reason he called everyone whose name he didn’t know “Lorenzo.”

That’s why on that day – the day of the hottest funeral, contrary to the facts and to all logic, I kept thinking that he would get up. That he would remove the piles of wilted flowers with his distinctive, clumsy gestures and dust off his six-and-a-half-foot, 350-pound body and say with his Greekest, most devilish smile: “Tek it eezy! Just a lital jok...”

Siko, Chroni, siko...

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Eggs with wild onions.

I hadn’t seen such a recipe anywhere. But I had eggs, and I had wild onions. I also had orregano. Ever since I married your father, I started putting orregano in everything.

“Lav, you’ve become more Greek than the Greek,” Polychronis would laugh. When he still laughed. He, on the other hand, was becoming more and more Bulgarian in his ways, to my surprise and displeasure. His look was increasingly grim – out of habit, not for a specific reason. He tapped his foot nervously. He ate dinner early, went to sleep late, but he didn’t take me out. He was always

rushing, insisting we “orientate ourselves.” I couldn’t understand where my easy-going Greek boy had gone. I missed him. But I didn’t know where to look for him, either. Definitely not inside the glass of tsipouro your father had taught me to drink with my salad in the evening. While he himself preferred Bulgarian rakia more and more regularly.

We had met somewhere around there – at the crossroads of national identities, in the heart of the confused and touchy Balkans. “Hm, so Polychronis is from Northern Greece?” Boris, my father, your Bulgarian grandfather, had plunged into thought. “Well, in that case he’s one of ours, a Bulgarian boy!” “Her family has roots in Thessaloniki?” Georgios, your Greek grandfather, the father of Polychronis, had exclaimed excitedly. “That makes Katerina practically Greek!”

We never learned to love each other without insisting we become the same. Without sticking the other person in our own scheme of things – making them either a Bulgarian, or a Greek.

But let me get back to the eggs with wild onions. In the cool morning of that day, the day that would mark our life forever, I decided to cook myself something. I didn’t do it often, I had neither the time, nor the desire. You had recently turned a year old, and amid caring for you and changing diapers, I would often forget about myself. But it was right then that I decided to have breakfast. Isn’t it strange how sometimes our body takes over indisputably, knowing what is best for us. It was to be my last peaceful meal for a long time to come.

I tiptoed across the cool kitchen of our mountain villa, praying you wouldn’t start to cry before I had finished preparing my unusual breakfast. You were sleeping serenely, with your hands upright, like the healthy, happy baby that you were. I even finished my coffee and managed to sneak in a text message to my brother: “Eggs with wild onions. Life is good.”

Sometimes text messages were my only connection with reality. But you wouldn’t understand that. Only mothers with young children would.

My brother replied: “You epicurean!”

A few hours later he would be on his way to see us. And he would lie to me that he had grown tired of life and that he missed me. That for this reason he had taken off in the middle of the work week, leaving Sofia for the Rhodope mountains. And I would swallow it all... I am naive sometimes, I must admit.



## Angel IGOV

was born in 1981 in Sofia. He studied English Studies at Sofia University where he also earned his PhD degree. He has been a Fulbright visiting researcher at the University of California, Berkeley. He currently teaches English Literature and Translation at Sofia University.

Igov’s novel *A Short Tale of Shame* (2011) was also published in English by Open Letter in 2013 resulting from the writers contest of the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation. He also authored two collections of short stories: *Road Encounters* (2002, the winner of a national award for debut), and *K.* (2006, nominated for the Elias Canetti award). His second novel, *The Meek*, focused on the first months of the communist regime in Bulgaria, is to be published in 2015.

Igov has worked as critic and journalist for various print and online media, the radio and the TV. In this capacity, he took part in the juries of the Vick prize for novel of the year (2007), the Ivan Nikolov prize for poetry book of the year (2009) and the Elias Canetti award (2013).

He has translated several novels by authors such as Ian McEwan, Paul Auster, Angela Carter, Martin Amis, John Banville, etc., as well as Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* and J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun*. Three of his translations were nominated for the Krustan Dyankov prize in 2008, 2009, and 2014. As a poetry translator, he took part in the first International Poetry Conference organized by Elizabeth Kostova Foundation in 2015.



## A SHORT TALE OF SHAME

### *Synopsis*

The narrative is told in the third person yet through the eyes of its four protagonists in turns. The novel opens with a middle-aged man on an aimless journey, driving three young hitchhikers – two girls and a boy – in his car. The man is recognized by the youngsters as the former guitar player of a one-time popular rock band and, more importantly, the father of a girl with whom the three have seemingly had an uneasy relationship. The latter is gradually revealed through the following chapters where readers receive insights into the different emotions the three young people

harbour. Also, their suspicions that the man must be living through an emotional crisis prove right when the narrative focuses on the recent death of his emotionally estranged wife and his difficult communication with his problem-child daughter. Through the youngsters' inner monologues and flashbacks, readers get to know the characters in detail and get glimpses of their unusually strong friendship, including both humorous and dramatic events, as stories about teenage crushes can be suddenly displaced by those related to drugs, domination, and violence.

By the time the three have persuaded the older man to join their journey, readers have learned more about the intricacies and tensions of their friendship and the role the man's daughter had to play in it. They have also had insights into the peculiar "alternative-history" setting of the novel: a pastiche of mock Balkan states, exploiting common stereotypes about the region, with complex history, ethnic strife, and toppled communist regimes. As the narrative progresses, the novel explores, through several key scenes, the feelings of shame, disgust, hubris, and fear that haunt all the four characters and, one way or another, focus on the absent yet dominating fifth. Several myths and symbolic events also acquire significance in this exploration; and it is in a semi-mythical atmosphere, amid expectations of crisis and tragedy, that the characters are finally able to start what could be a process of catharsis.

## A Short Tale of Shame

*Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel*

Irina passed away in January. It had been four months now: just as long as she'd been in a coma, still alive, without knowing it. Krustev remembered his wife's body, shrunken, thin, worn-out and misshapen, bound by unquestioning tubes to mysterious devices which allowed it to exist a bit longer on the threshold between life and death. He felt like tubes had been stuck into him, too, pouring first fear into his blood, then hope and finally a colorless, watery liquid, the very essence of futility. You do understand, don't you, the head doctor had told him some time in October, when it was already clear that there wouldn't be any quick recovery and that they could only hope for a miracle, but miracles like that do happen, don't they, in these kinds of cases, yes, but you do understand, he told him, that if your wife recovers, it is very possible that she will not be the same person, right now it's difficult to say how disabled she might be. Irina could come out of the coma drained of her identity, without memories, without thoughts even, without taking in anything around her, a vegetating presence in a wheelchair. Yet he nevertheless nursed hopes until the last, he had clung to his wife after all that creeping marital coldness, after they had lived almost separately for the past four years, her boyfriend, the theater director, also came to see her as often as Krustev did, but they had asked the hospital staff to stagger their visits, neither one wanted to see the other, Krustev now remembered that there had been a similar story in one of the books he had read in the early spring, only there the husband and the lover took care of their shared wife together, it wasn't like that in his case, perhaps both of them blamed each other at least a bit for what had happened. Krustev was constantly wondering about guilt, not just whether he himself was guilty, but whether guilt even existed at all as something you could touch or feel or whether at the end of the day everything was a sea of dreams and wakings, which we all will drown in some day, a sea like that one down below, he lifted his head and saw the kids looking at him rather worriedly, so he suggested they get a beer and this time he wouldn't take no for an answer, went over to the ferryboat's concession stand and came back with four cold cans.

So why, Spartacus asked, abruptly jerking him into a completely other time, did Euphoria really break up? Good question, why had they broken up really, perhaps because the singer had started acting more and more like the head,

heart and ass of the group, or because the keyboardist was against the more commercial sound of their final years, or maybe – and this seemed the likeliest answer to Krustev – because nobody felt like playing anymore. When he stopped to think about it, they had only been around thirty – thirty-something, pretty early for exhaustion, but the rock-band life had sucked them dry unexpectedly quickly, they needed to be reborn as new people, they still had the strength and opportunity to do it, and yes, well yes, they did just that. Krustev suddenly felt, or at least he thought that he felt as if not only his mind, but his very senses were beginning to run on memories, he felt the pain from the metal strings running through his fingertips, the pain that had been so persistent in his early teenage years when he was just starting to play, later, of course, his fingers had calloused over and didn't hurt anymore. Man, you're a serious rocker, he told the boy, and he really was impressed by his taste and knowledge, the boy shrugged his bony shoulders humbly. Only here, on the deck where the four of them were standing together, upright, only here could Krustev get a clearer idea of what his fellow travelers looked like: the boy, tall and skinny, taller than he was, with a constantly distracted expression; the blonde Maya, who had a rather ordinary face, but lively eyes and a compact, athletic figure; and finally the slightly mysterious and distant ringleader of the group, with curly black hair and blue eyes, Krustev guessed she had lots of admirers and then immediately wondered whether that word was even still used, the truth was that at times he felt like a old man in their company, even though he had gotten used to always being young, both in his life as a musician and in that as a businessman, he was always the youngster, they didn't take him seriously at first, then suddenly they'd be shocked at how much he'd accomplished for his age, what are forty years, he could still live another forty, and he was sure that within a week he could get back into shape after those months spent in the empty house, that he could once again feel energetic and healthy, but hey, his body would never be as quick and flexible as the bodies of these people around him ever again. He could feel the beer filling his bladder insultingly quickly, impudently squeezing his prostate, he excused himself and found the grimy toilet down below by the cars, poorly lit by a yellow bulb, his stream gushed with gurgling relief, he zipped his fly and slowly started back up the stairs, climbed up on deck and stood by himself for a while before going back to the trio.

The strangest part was that he had gradually *gotten used to* it all: the visits to the hospital, the silent Irina tangled up in plastic tubes, the white sheets, the nurses, the smell of bleach in the hallways, where men and women padded

around in green pajamas. Krustev sat by his wife's bed and talked to her in his mind, that way the words weren't left hanging in the startling absence of an answer. He talked to her about Elena, about the dog, about the house, sometimes about business, a few times he tried to clear up how exactly, imperceptibly and secretly, like the rotting of a seemingly sound fruit, their relationship had gone cold. Her coma couldn't turn back time, he still knew that he no longer loved Irina the way they had loved each other in their wild and sunny younger years, but now, when she inhabited the space between life and death, when she was so far from him that he couldn't reach her with words or touch, he suddenly felt close to her again, or rather he felt close to her in a new way, almost as if she were a sister. Irina was now the only person who didn't want anything from him. And even though he secretly hoped for a miracle up to the very end, sometimes he caught himself fearing that possible moment when Irina would flutter her eyelids, heavy from sleep, the long sleep of the sea, when he thought about the dead current that was sweeping her along, Krustev shuddered and suddenly imagined how, if he put his ear to his wife's body, he would hear the sea roaring inside her, as inside a shell. She really was a shell, the form of a living creature, emptied of her soft, slimy and slithering substance, at once alluring and repellent. And he would talk to that shell, sensing how everything around him withdrew and he was left alone with her in the white silence of the hospital room, as if time had stopped. But before Christmas, Elena came back from the States again, pale, thin, with circles under her eyes, she burst into tears when she saw her mother and the thread was broken, the whole quiet harmony that Krustev had built up day after day fell apart. At that moment he felt hatred for his daughter, that intruder from out of nowhere, a part of both of them, who had cunningly leapt into the world and come between them. Then he told himself that he was probably going crazy, but he couldn't shake the feeling that this young woman was a stranger to him, now much more than ever, and the shell in the hospital bed could not fill up the chasm between them, on the contrary, it opened it all the wider. And after that, shortly after New Year's, which he and his daughter spent at home, staring at the television, almost without speaking, Irina died. As if during that whole time she had been hesitating and had finally made a decision. Sepsis, the head doctor said, poisoning of the blood, her liver couldn't hold out, I was also hoping until the last, I'm sorry.



## Mirela IVANOVA

(May 11, 1962, Sofia) is a poet, prose writer, translator and journalist. She has written seven books of poetry, a collection of eleven poems and eleven short stories, and a collection of short stories (*All Stories Are for You*, 2014). She has won many national and international awards. Her latest book *All Stories Are for You* was nominated for the annual Helikon award for contemporary Bulgarian prose.

Already established as one of the emblematic modern poets in Bulgaria and Europe and a laureate of multiple national and international poetry awards, Mirela Ivanova has surprised readers with unexpectedly vivid prose. Having penned seven books of poetry, in 2009 she published an extravagant two-genre book, *Slow*, divided between eleven short stories and eleven poems. *Slow*, written in the International Artists' House Villa Concordia in Bamberg, has garnered great interest, having had two Bulgarian editions, and some of the short stories have now been published in prominent German-language literary magazines and anthologies. In early 2014 Prozorets Publishing House published a dozen new short stories by Mirela Ivanova under the title *All Stories Are for You*.

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## Close at Hand

Translated by Sylvia Petrova

For Zou

Even though she was here only for the conference, for three days counted down to the last breathless instant, she finally got up her courage to write the letter. It was also time she looked love straight in the eye. She found beautiful yellowish sheets of paper and an envelope with the hotel's logo in the brochure folder in her room. She wrote a draft during the first night and put it away in her handbag, read it twice, once during the coffee break after she had presented her paper, and then inside the withering emptiness of the last tram she took back to the hotel after a noisy dinner with her colleagues. She was amazed at how she had preserved her large, beautiful handwriting. "Perhaps because I am still old-fashioned," the thought crossed her mind. She believed that once handwritten, words acquire some spirit and emanate their own energy.

*My dear Ivo,*

*I used to love writing letters, responding to letters and did so once, when I imagined I had all of time's infinity at my disposal. I clung to the utopia of that parallel, more meaningful and deeper life, I liked to foresee, analyze and invent it, I felt free and different amidst words and allowed myself such lavishness of mind and intuition, while imagination often took me to the very impossible horizon of sharing. I was even sure that I would become a writer, while now I am merely my dad's most precious dream-come-true. This is exactly what my dear old dad had wanted most: for me to become a doctor, because he was a doctor, in other words, his complete continuation, delighting him with grandchildren in my prime, actually no, he always used the term "sweet little grandchildren." And here I am, Associate Professor Kamelia K., in a white coat with a stethoscope in my left pocket, with a grown-up child I raised myself and two biographies – before and after communism – stitched together somehow or other, two specialties and the crowding pain in front of my consulting room. Dad would be happy, if he could see me from somewhere in the hereafter, with the many flowers in my room, he would also take pity on me for the hard time I am having and my puffy eyes stuck together with exhaustion in the evening, and for falling asleep dog-tired even before the shivers of self-pity, doubt, various kinds of solitude and despair all start creeping over me. The week before I left, I decided I ought to tell you during our next lunch flooded with wine and cheerful laughter that I was in love with you, that I have loved you*

*throughout all of these seventeen years, if not more... I do not recall if we met after my getting married and divorced or before, but only in you do I recognize my inspiration for living. Or else the daily meat grinder that whirls me awake at six a.m. would have annihilated my nature. A few mornings ago I was in a sour mood already in the crammed shuttle, and then I spilt my coffee which I had gotten from the machine in front of the medical center. It was as if I spilt over some tension onto the ten patients, clustered in the niche in front of my office. Before lunch I conducted examinations and filled dozens of pages with names and diagnoses of human pain while waiting for your call, but instead of you, my mother rang me worried, she was running a temperature and if she got sick now who would look after her mother, my eighty-year-old grandmother who had been bedridden for about a year and a half, then my daughter called crying, she had fallen on the sidewalk in front of her high school, her knee was bleeding, her tights were torn and she did not have enough cash to get a cab home, could she possibly get a cab and come to me so I could pay for it, then bandage her leg and give her cash for new tights and another cab, "of course, I'll be waiting for you, please don't cry, you're all grown up, in two months you'll be graduating" and then I remembered her as a little girl with scraped knees and a smile that never left her little face, waving to me from the top of the jungle gym, and you turning your head away, scared to look at her and this picture filled me to the brim as much as the thought that she has already been accepted to a university in Arizona and will be leaving very soon, and without hesitation I let female patient number 13 in, left her to wait and went out, it was past 12:30 p.m., I wanted to grab crackers, get some coffee and drink it instead of spilling it, and borrow some money from the administrator, as my daughter was to arrive any moment. A friend was patiently waiting for me in front of my door, she was the only one who had not taken the liberty of disturbing me on this crazy day. I had helped her some time ago and now she was back from Italy wanting to give me a gift. On the miserable staircase where we hid to have a smoke, I managed to tell her briefly about my hellish day and she laughed and took a blouse out of her bag, the silk flowed along her arms and stopped at a large and beautiful mother-of-pearl button and this was the only thing I could hold on to that day, the next days and in this repulsive reality. It was your text message reminding me of our lunch on Friday the 15<sup>th</sup> at 1:15 p.m. that brought me back to my shoes and got me on my feet.*

*Dear Ivo, we are getting old while always just missing each other in this delightful way. I have been repeating this to myself right here, at each step I have taken, as I imagined your jerky walk along with my running around you, and*

*how I would be telling you about the city during our lunch, and I do not want this, I want to live it with you, to see it in the shining green deepness of your eyes, to touch you and kiss you in the hotel room, and elsewhere from now on, because I have loved you for seventeen years, if not more ...*

Kamelia got to the airport a few hours earlier, checked in her luggage and sat down in a coffee shop to re-write the letter. It seemed to her unfinished and she froze in the noisy loneliness of the place, squeezing the big mother-of-pearl button of her blouse with her left hand. She wished she could think up the ending with one sentence alone, to name that very impossible horizon of sharing, where she would finally be loved and desired.

As she was sealing the envelope, Professor Lumacci from Naples came to her table and took a seat without waiting to be invited, kissed her hand and started talking about her paper as an opportunity for a future project between them, why didn't she come to work at his clinic for a year or two, he was all beaming with joy, as though singing a Verdi aria. Tearing the draft letter to tiny pieces, Kamelia awoke from her stupor and carefully, almost on tiptoe approached the meaning of the proposal she had just heard. As if for the first time she looked at Gianfranco who was offering her a glass of Prosecco beaming and almost fervently, and burst out laughing at his loquacious and melodious toast to their future.

He saw her off and they waved at each other for quite some time, exhilarated by the Prosecco and their old-fashioned shock at the fact that they did not want to part for as long as two months, after which she would land at Naples airport and he would meet her there.

The letter lay on the table in the sealed and unaddressed envelope with the hotel's logo. A waiter looked at it and even opened it. He did not understand the large handwritten letters so he took it to the bar. At midnight, as nobody had asked about it, he dropped it in the paper recycling bin. In this place, they had been collecting trash separately for a long time.



# K

## Zachary KARABASHLIEV

is a novelist, playwright and screenwriter. His debut novel, *18% Gray* is a bestselling title with 22 editions in Bulgaria, published in the United States, France, Poland, and Macedonia. It won the prestigious Novel of the Year Award, granted by the Vick Foundation, in Bulgaria and was chosen by anonymous vote to be among the 100 most beloved books in the Bulgarian version of the BBC's "The Big Read" campaign. His short stories are included in the collections *A Brief History of the Airplane* (Helikon Prize 2009) and *Symmetry* and are translated and published in many languages; his stage plays have won numerous prestigious awards – *Recoil* received an Audience Award in Wiesbaden Theatre Biennial, Germany "New Plays from Europe", and his play *Lissabon* was staged at the legendary La Mamma Theatre in New York City in April 2014.

Zachary Karabashliev is currently the editor-in-chief of the largest Bulgarian publishing house Ciela and lives in Sofia.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE AIRPLANE

*A Brief History of the Airplane* (Ciela 2009) is Zachary Karabashliev's second book, following his debut novel *18% Gray*. This collection of short stories simultaneously won the jury's choice and audience's choice awards in Bulgaria's prestigious Helikon Literary Competition. Karabashliev's work has begun gaining attention outside of Bulgaria as well. As American critic Arthur Salm noted: "In Zachary Karabashliev's stunning collection of stories, things fall apart ... or, more to the point (or to Karabashliev's knife-edged prose), things get sliced to pieces..."

The Helikon jury argued that the strength of Karabashliev's prose lies in its "terse and realistic recreation of how the universe's warmth and coldness is reflected in the microcosm of the family." Indeed, many of the stories in this compelling collection are about the family and its infinite variations. They are also about displacement – not just physical, but emotional. Zachary Karabashliev introduces vivid and funny characters who often make choices that seem both impossible and inevitable.

In "Departures," the narrator's mother has fallen in love with bougainvillea while visiting him in California and is dead set on taking it back to Bulgaria and planting it there, despite numerous warnings that it would have no chance of surviving the harsh continental winters.

In "House in the Mountains," a not-quite-successful screenwriter, looking for inspiration and refuge in the mountains of Bulgaria, is unnerved by the tales associated with the ruins of an old house.

"Warmth from a Stranger" is a story about a possible but unreal romance between a photographer and the young woman sitting next to him on the bus. It takes no more than the unknown girl's touch to cause the photographer to abandon – in his searing fantasy, at least – his family.

"The Colt" is a candid snapshot of the spiritual state of a middle-aged man who has lost his tie to nature and ultimately to his primal self.

"Metastases" describes the final (and first) fragile moments of intimacy between an alcoholic father in Bulgaria and his son, who is living in California. In a twist of fate, the incurable tumor brings the father back to the family he himself had destroyed with his ruinous addiction.

"A Brief History of the Airplane" compresses several decades of life in a Bulgarian village where the Communist Party leaders have installed an airplane-café. The villagers dismantle not only a would-be symbol of a proud if decaying

communist future, but their very way of looking at the world.

The stories in this dazzling collection resonate with sorrow, humor and compassion. Zachary Karabashliev's witty and exquisite use of language is often a challenge to translate, since his voice makes use of different registers in different stories. At the same time his writing transcends ethnical and cultural differences and evokes eternal human experience.



## A Brief History of the Airplane

*Excerpt / Translated by Zachary Karabashliev*

It was spring when they brought it. It was transported in parts and assembled on the spot within a few days. They positioned it at the end of the village, close to the main road, between the private vineyards and the cooperative apricot orchards. Many outsiders fell into the false assumption that it just happened to be there because of our close proximity to Varna International Airport, Bulgaria's second largest, but they were far from the truth. The locals, however, knew the truth – the white airplane came to our village directly from the USSR. It was an idea of the local Communist Party leadership – a retired

from service Soviet passenger aircraft was imported from faraway lands with the sole purpose of turning our model village into a unique one. We had been chosen to be the only village in the Republic with an airplane cafe. And what a cafe it was!

In the days after its grand opening, we'd wait with our parents in line for hours to climb up the narrow steps, sit down in the soft seats, and order pastries and Coca-Cola (it didn't seem suitable to sit down in an airplane and drink a locally bottled soda pop). Waitresses dressed as stewardesses would take our orders with a smile.

The interior of the airplane was preserved authentically – only the seats were adjusted so to face each other, little glass-topped tables between them, and together they formed cozy booths.

The manager of this peculiar cafe was a man named Stoicho. He wore a mustache and a pilot uniform. In the beginning Stoicho would let every one of us get in the cockpit and vroom a little behind the navigation systems, but only if we didn't touch anything. Sometimes we'd get carried away, grab the steering wheel, and step hard on the pedal as if to take to the air, pulling the whole village behind us, and join the real planes soaring above the airport. Boys. Then Stoicho would ground us with a smack behind the neck and send us back to eat sweets.

At the end of this memorable school year, before summer break, they organized a field trip and sent us to clean the area around the Airplane. They landscaped it with grass, flowerbeds, beautiful young pine trees, and planted a group of cypresses that stood tall and slender like watchmen. The area turned into a sort of park, maintained by Party organized collective clean-ups.

Along with the white metal bird, other changes came to our village. On the main road connecting us to the big city, there was one more bus stop – “The Airplane.” The sweaty bus drivers bitched and bitched, until they got used to the fact that the Airplane was there to stay, and passengers would get on and off at that bus stop just as they did at any other.

That same year, the traveling circus, which entertained us every summer, built its pavilion not at the soccer stadium as usual but next to the Airplane.

The big village fair at the end of that August turned into a misunderstanding – the gypsy vendors early in the morning put up their stands around the Airplane, while the Ferris wheel, the Merry-go-rounds, and the shooting galleries had

been erected at their usual place in the village square. So we had to shoot pellets and eat cotton candy at one place, then run back to buy action-toy cowboys at the other.

The greatest influence the Airplane had was on the local social life. Before, we would hang out in the village square (we called it The Center), and hid behind the convenience store to smoke cigarettes. Now we began to prefer the more secluded area around the Airplane. The newly formed park attracted the youth with its new benches, its closeness to nature (apricot orchards and vineyards), and its remoteness from the local police station.

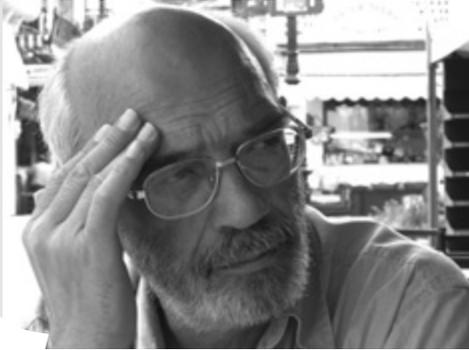
The surrounding neighborhood remained sketchy with its large unfinished houses, chicken coops and laundry out back, only now, it had a name – “By the Airplane.” As time went on, the villagers of that district began to conduct themselves differently, and distanced themselves from the rest of the village, as if ashamed of it. Their kids became cocky, which is exactly why they got beat up after school. And still we watched with a little envy as they grew smaller, walking down the hill, in small groups, backpacks slung over shoulders, as if they were headed home not to their chickens but to some exotic island.

Back then, our fathers had good jobs, our mothers had time for us, our grandparents gave us spare change, and we lived just a few kilometers from the largest city on the Black Sea coast, in the only village with an airplane cafe. Our village welcomed the highest-ranking communist leaders, who came on government business or to hunt. Our village also hosted all sorts of foreign delegations. More than one or two heads of state weaved around the sun-baked pavement of the square, dancing the *horro*, and ate our white, honey-roasted breads.

But there was something that tormented the collective consciousness of the local folk. It was a small, tragic secret, unspoken and invisible to the outside world, perfectly concealed by us. The tragic thing was not that we lived in a village, but rather that we fervently desired for it to be a town. We had everything required to become a town: population, infrastructure, communications, and the people's will. Every year we expected our local Party leadership to solve this problem, but it was always delayed. The reason for this constant delay was that our village was destined to be a model village of socialist life, and not let it become just another cute little town – it was already decided by the higher-ups.

We were sentenced to live in the showcase of regional socialism. And the Airplane only solidified our status.

# K



## Hristo KARASTOYANOV

Born on February 22, 1950, in Topolovgrad, Bulgaria, Hristo Karastoyanov is a multi-award winning contemporary Bulgarian novelist. He is the author of 30 books, numerous political essays, and has worked as a playwright and editor. Karastoyanov's body of work is characterized by an intellectual, literary nonconformity and a fascination with the unchanging elements of humanity throughout history. Despite being widely respected, he enjoys his outsider status, something which he strongly believes is necessary for authenticity.

Karastoyanov's short story collection *Wanted: A Wife for My Husband*, 2006, was translated into Turkish (Kocama Karı Ariyorum) and the book was presented at the 25th Istanbul Book Fair in 2006. In 2008, the book *Atlantis: Acts* was translated into English. In 2012, his trilogy *Teufelszwirn (Coo Coo's Yarn)* was translated and published in German.

His latest novel, *The Same Night Awaits Us All: Diary of a Novel*, 2014 is currently being translated into English and is already the recipient of several awards. A play, *Geo* – an abstract rendering of the novel – is in development at the Bulgarian National Theater Ivan Vazov.

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### THE SAME NIGHT AWAITS US ALL: DIARY OF A NOVEL

The book was published to wide critical acclaim – it is already a winner of one of the most important Bulgarian literary prizes “Dabut na Pencho” (Pencho’s Oak) for its contribution to contemporary Bulgarian literature, and of the prestigious Helikon award. It is written almost like a graphic novel, an episodic thriller whose ending you already know, but whose story breaks your heart over and over again as it unfolds under the gaze of three main narrators, two of whom often take the reader on a dark road for that extra minute before revealing which of them, exactly, is narrating.

Vividly resurrecting the friendship while detailing the fabled, doomed fates of Geo Milev and Georgi Sheytanov—two men who rose against the fascist tyranny of the 1920s Bulgarian government, the book also draws vast, unabashed, contemporary parallels—it is a political book just as much as it is a work of fiction. Above all, it is an important book. But it is also a deeply funny book.

*Izidora Angel, Writer, Editor, Translator*

## The Same Night Awaits Us All: Diary of a Novel

*Excerpt / Translated by Izidora Angel*

2.

[Tuesday, January 22, 2013]

What might have he thought, when a handful of unkempt idiots in breeches jumped out from the train tracks with their crooked rifles? . . . He knew exactly who they were—mobilized idiots from the surrounding villages. The whole country knew how the authorities gathered armed groups in each village and asked them to patrol the train tracks, since killing thugs was still legal—a law left over from Stamboliyski and from the Law for the Protection of Bulgaria<sup>1</sup>, with its newly added eleventh article . . .

He could have easily escaped the mangy scrag—it wouldn’t have been the first time. The wheat had grown high that spring, and if he slipped into the surrounding fields he’d disappear in five minutes and after an hour or two, he’d be in the graying mountains to the north . . . If he took off to the east, he’d be in Yambol by dark and they’d never get him.

But he probably realized that these guys were already scared to death and if he took off they’d start shooting at random with their carbines.

And they would get Mariola . . .

He sighed and stood up.

“Stop, don’t move!” the others started screaming. “Stop, don’t move, we’ll shoot!”

“Relax,” he groaned. “Can’t you see I’ve got my hands up? And put these rifles away before someone gets hurt.”

[Wednesday, January 23, 2013]

He looked into Mariola’s eyes and his heart broke from anguish and powerlessness: there was no hope in her eyes . . . only fear.

A few days earlier they had made a fatal mistake and there was no use now in laying blame on each other: they had sent the miller to Urvata for provisions, and the grocer would had to have been an idiot not to figure out what was

<sup>1</sup>A special law passed by parliament on January 4, 1924 and enacted on January 23, 1924, which set a precedent in allowing literary works to be incriminated.

happening when the person in front of him asked for sixteen packs of cigarettes, all different brands. It didn't take long for the search party to come after them—an entire horde of savage, anti-partisan rogues from Turnovo. He yelled up at his men to keep running, and sprawled across the mill-stream, shooting at anyone from the enraged posse who showed his head above the piles of last year's dried leaves—just so he could make them panic even more and lose time. Somewhere behind him, Mariola attempted to take her own life with a gun, and were it not for Zhelyo, she may have. “Mariola!” he hissed in her ear. “I'll rip your head off, girl! You're gonna stop with this shit.” He then dragged her up between the trees—away from the ambush and into the icy rain, which hadn't stopped for days in that spring of twenty five, until all of them were soaked down to their frozen bones.

[Thursday, January 24, 2013]

He caught up with them all the way up at Predela. And when he laid eyes on Mariola, drenched like a frightened forest animal, with the same spring coat she'd put on in Kilifarevo on the Monday after Easter, he quickly took off the Poseidon raincoat from his shoulders and wrapped her up in it. He pushed the wet strands of hair from her forehead, but he had no idea what to say to her.

[Friday, January 25, 2013]

Back in Kilifarevo, they couldn't get enough of the story . . . When, on the tenth of June the previous year, a day after the coup, the bells in Kilifarevo started ringing and the crowd gathered in protest against the coup organizers, it was none other than Mariola's father who came out to talk to the dyspeptic people in the village square: either in his capacity as an army reserve captain, or as the former district constable of Turnovo—either way—those in power now had made him the chair of a three-person committee in the Democratic Alliance party, which they had put in charge by removing the village administration. But nobody wanted to hear a word of it. They told him that the fascist committee of his wasn't going to be doing any work here and announced they were dismantling it and reinstating the village counsel.

And there you had it: her father had joined the fascists, and here she was running away with a band of anarchists. Not with the agrarians, not even with the communists, but with the anarchists . . .



## Dimitar Shosho KOTZEV

Born January 3, 1971, in Sofia, Bulgaria

Education:

Masters in English Philology and Literature – Sofia University

Masters in TV and Film Directing – National Academy for Film and Theatre

*Work experience:*

Free-lance translator – *Other Voices, Other Rooms* by Truman Capote, *The Sheltering Sky* by Paul Bowles, *Still Life with Woodpecker* by Tom Robbins (Awarded the prizes for Best Young Translator and Best Translation from the English Language)

Editor – *Ah, Maria* magazine; editor-in-chief – *Kamikaze* magazine

Free-lance director – numerous TV shows, TV ads, live and recorded concerts, music videos and documentaries

Artistic director – MM Television between 2002 and 2005, writer and director of MM Television Music Awards between 2002 and 2008

Author – *Lora from Morning till Evening* (2004) and *Shrimp* (2015)

## Filmography:

- Reflection* (1996) – short film, co-writer, co-director
- The Invisible Children* (2006) – documentary, director
- ATM* (2008) – short film, script
- Voodoo Calendar* (2009) – short film, script, director
- Shopping* (2010) – short film, script, director, producer
- Tilt* (2011) – feature film, script developer
- Lora from Morning till Evening* (2011) – feature film, script, director, co-producer
- Man under Surveillance* (2015) – documentary, script, director, producer (in post-production)
- My Father, My Mother, My Sister* (2015) – feature film, script, director, producer (in production)
- Some Luck for Later* (2013) – feature film, script advisor (in pre-production)
- The Fourth Estate* (2013) – TV series, director, script, associated producer

## SHRIMP

### Synopsis

Diva Mila is a 27-year-old woman with hypnotic green eyes. She's also a superstar in the colourful and mystic world of clairvoyants, psychics, and fortune-tellers. People keep flocking to her house in hopes of getting a glimpse into their futures.

One of Diva Mila's most special customers is the Assistant—a 70-year-old man who claims to be the assistant of the mythical criminal boss Gorky. Gorky, however, is a fictitious fragment of the Assistant's own imagination—the actual boss of the underworld is the Assistant himself. He has come up with this ruse as a way of keeping himself safe from competition while the other mobsters consider him as a mere intermediary.

Bor is 28 years old and possesses a particularly low sense of self-esteem. He has just been fired from his job in a small advertising agency. He looks and feels like a loser but is loved by the only daughter of the Assistant. The criminal boss and his ever-silent wife despise the young man and want him out of their daughter's life.

The Assistant decides that the best solution is to keep the young man close at hand, so he hires Bor as a member of his underground organization. He also advises him to undergo a “psychological” evaluation at Diva Mila's. Through

her special powers, the Assistant hopes to learn more about “the boy,” as he calls him, so that he can come up with a way to get rid of him. In the meantime, Diva Mila is dealing with problems of her own—a powerful group of clairvoyants, headed by heavy-weight Slavania, is lobbying to make the fortune-tellers' trade illegal, so that it can have full monopoly on it with the help of a corrupt police boss. Diva Mila tries to reason with the group by explaining that their entire plan could fall apart if they lose their patron's good will, but her arguments fall on deaf ears. Seeing that her professional world is in danger of being outlawed, she decides to go for a trade—she agrees to do anything the Assistant wants in order to deal with Bor, and the Assistant would block Slavania's plan by activating his own parliamentary lobby. But this deal backfires when the Assistant eliminates the police boss and takes full control over the world of clairvoyants. He decides to go forward with the grand plan because he sees an opportunity for great profits. Diva Mila, on the other hand, falls in love with Bor, thus forming an alliance that jeopardizes the balance within the mafia. In the meantime, after coming up with an ingenious idea of how to spark the ailing drug trade back into life, Bor suddenly becomes an invaluable asset to the Assistant. The ageing population of “good old” Europe calls for a complete change of the paradigm, so Bor suggests that pensioners, rather than young people, should be the new target of drug dealing. Thanks to this idea, the money starts pouring down on the Assistant and suddenly his opinion of Bor is turned upside down. Diva Mila's love affair with Bor no longer suits the Assistant. The situation turns into a dangerous game of deceit, lies, and false predictions. The pitiful army of clairvoyants is stacked up against the mighty mafia.

The outcome is written in the brown residue on the bottom of a cup of coffee—a smiling shrimp symbolizes both love and death. Which one is it going to be?



# Shrimp

*Excerpt / Translated by Ekaterina Petrova*

Three little cars of different models and different colors, manufactured in different years, were making their way through the afternoon traffic jam. At first sight, they didn't attract any attention whatsoever—they were simply three of the thousands of vehicles crawling through the city. But anybody who bothered to give them a closer look would've noticed that they were driving in the same direction, following behind one another closely, and lingering, as to always go through the traffic lights together. The first little car was driven by a woman in her late fifties or early sixties. She smiled constantly, as though once again reliving some very pleasant memory in her head. She held the steering wheel with her left hand at the 10 o'clock and her right hand at the 2 o'clock position, as if she was taking her driver's exam. Riding in the second car was an elderly gentleman whose expression was completely impenetrable. This car was driven by a slight and kindly looking girl, aged anywhere between seventeen and thirty-seven. The last car contained four Vietnamese men, who attracted the unabashed curiosity of everyone who laid eyes on them. It wasn't that the city's inhabitants were racist; it was just that they were so bogged down in their petty prejudices, their superstitions, and their own shortcomings that coming face-to-face with representatives of a different race caused them to experience the same kind of astonishment they would've felt upon seeing a duck-billed platypus. Such an attitude to the world could be labeled as auto-racism, as it put the inhabitants of this end of Europe in a disadvantaged position in their relation to that part of the wide white world, where skin of a different color wasn't cause for dismay. And yet, too busy marvelling at the little car with the Vietnamese, the people here paid no attention to the other two cars. And that was precisely the point of the whole exercise.

The unusual motorcade drove across the entire city, before finally getting to an enormous shipping warehouse near the airport. The cars stopped at the boom gate. A well-built security guard came out of the little booth and gave the ridiculous procession a condescending once-over.

"Where to, auntie?" he said.

Still gripping the steering wheel, the woman continued to stare straight ahead. In the quietness of the late afternoon, the low rumble of the three tiny engines provoked a sense of offence in the security guard. He signaled the

woman to roll down her window. She didn't do it. This set the young man on edge and a threatening smile stretched across his face.

"How about you move right along, huh?" he said. "You and your whole posse of little espresso machines."

He made a dismissive gesture toward the other two cars. Still smiling, the woman just nodded in the direction of the boom gate. This caused something in him to boil over, as black as coffee. He slammed the palm of his hand onto the roof of the car.

"Don't make me say it again!"

At that instant, the security guard heard the doors of the last car opening up, all at the same time. The four Vietnamese men came out and headed toward him, without saying anything. He got momentarily startled, but quickly recovered, took out his gun, and pointed it in their direction.

"Back off, you Chinese!" he shouted.

Then he felt somebody touch his shoulder and quickly turned around, in order to face the danger. To his relief, however, what he saw weren't more enemies, but re-enforcements—the head of security and two of his colleagues.

"Only a minor hiccup," the security guard said with a smile. "I was just getting them out of here."

"Your weapon," his boss said and reached out his hand. "We'll consider the hiccup resolved. Don't forget to drop off your badge on your way out."

For the security guard, this was too much information to process all at the same time. He simply froze—he ceased moving, ceased thinking, and ceased existing.

"My apologies!" the head of security told the woman, who hadn't stopped smiling the whole time, although there was no trace of gentleness left in her smile by now.

Shivers of fear ran down the spine of the demoted security guard. The barrier went up and the three little cars slipped into the warehouse's yard. The barrier went down. The security guard found himself standing alone on the outside.



# Rouja LAZAROVA

was born in 1968 in Sofia. She published her first short stories in the '80s in the magazines *Studentska Tribuna* and *Pulse* and *Rodna Rech* newspaper.

She studied French Philology at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, as well as political studies at the Paris Institute of Political Studies. She has been living in Paris since 1991. Her first novel was published in French in 1998. She continues writing novels, short stories, and plays. Her novel *Mausoleum* was a success among both French and Bulgarian readers and was nominated for four prestigious literary awards.

Lazarova works as a freelance journalist for French and Bulgarian print media. From 1998 to 2005 she was a correspondent for the Bulgarian Section of the BBC. For twenty years she covered social and local political topics for the French press group *Moniteur*.

## Bibliography

### Novels:

*Deep Inside the Bosom* (2014, in Bulgarian)

*The Muscle of Silence* (2012, in French)

*Mausoleum* (2009, in French)

*Breaks* (2004, in French)

*Crossed Hears* (2000, in French, translated into Japanese)

*On the Tip of the Tongue* (In French)

### Short Stories

“Election Promise” (2012)

“Oscar’s Eyebrows” (received an award

for French-language story by the The Orientale University of Naples, 2012)

“Honeymoon Trip, the Escape” (2011)

“Convulsion” (2000)

“Mouse in the Water” (1998)

### Other

“Viktor Paskov, Contemporary Bulgarian Writer” in *Lettres européennes: Manuel universitaire d’histoire de la littérature européenne*.

*No Thrills* (play, 2012)

*One Night of...* (short play)

*The Fifty-Year-Olds* (play)

*Fair* (short radio play, France Culture Radio, November 2000)

## THE MUSCLE OF SILENCE

### Synopsis

A passionate love story between a Nazi camp survivor and a communism victim.

A strange love between a 75-year old man and a 35-year old woman, between a psychiatrist and his patient. A real deep love, connecting two damaged people, helping them to heal the wounds of the past together.

The novel gives a new perspective on the totalitarian regimes and their marks on humans. It explores death, survival, memory, desire, – key words that gradually create some kind of existential dictionary as the story unfolds.



# The Muscle of Silence

*Excerpt / Translated by Ethan Rundell*

## Chapter II

“It all began on account of the bananas, I caught myself saying one day. I had found another word.”

The bananas came from “outside” and the word I immediately associated with “outside” was “freedom”. In wintertime, the Party-State imported bananas in trifling quantities that it distributed sparingly. The rumor that a store was to receive a delivery roused waves of misshapen citizens, who ran aground in the waiting line. When the truck parked next to the store, the crowd would be seized by excitement. Soon, the saleswoman was measuring out the kilos, one kilo – one person. Eyes devoured the bananas as bunches of them passed from hand to hand. Already, people would be talking about running out of stock and the atmosphere would harden. People flew into a rage, jostled one another, emitted vulgar curses. It would come to blows. The saleswoman would get worked up, as her swearwords raised the level of vulgarity yet another notch.

One day, my mother returned home with a large package that she placed on the table. She proudly undid the package. A crate of bananas emerged from the brown wrapping paper. “They have to be eaten before they rot!” my father chuckled, stamping out his cigarette butt in the ashtray.

At dessert time, mother distributed three bananas. I contemplated mine. We rarely had exotic fruits. I carefully peeled the banana and wolfed it down. My mouth filled with the floury and sticky matter, its bland odor. Then, it slid, in large chunks, into my throat. My mother continued to speak. My father lit a cigarette.

At night, the thought of the bananas prevented me from falling asleep. Finally, I got up, silently crept to the kitchen without turning on the light. A street lamp lit the table on which I placed the crate. I peeled a banana and ate it in the same way as the first – efficiently. Then another, a third... All of them.

Lying in bed, I felt my stomach change shape, harden. The bananas had congealed into a ball at the entry to my intestines, already obstructing the flows of my body and worrying me. It would never be digested, I absolutely had to get rid of it! I got up, dragged myself to the toilets... and vomited. The consistency had not changed much, the same substance, a little stickier and less chalky.

The fights over soup were a blow to human dignity. I have to say, not without

a certain pride, that I never fought for the soup. Doubtless because I was the weakest. But I’m not ashamed to remember it today. The most disgusting were the soup lickers who licked the cauldron clean after the soup had been served. They began at the rim, crawled towards the bottom and came out covered in filth. We despised all of them, except Dentist, a notorious soup licker. We respected him. He came from Treblinka, he had pulled gold teeth from the corpses of the gas chambers. We were terrified of him. Today, fifty years later, when I am invited to dinner, I can’t stand it when someone serves me soup. I always serve myself. And I make sure to take from the bottom of the tureen.

“I ate them all, the entire crate.”

I moved nervously in the armchair, crossing and uncrossing my legs, I leant on my left elbow, then on my right. I was so ashamed!

“Then I threw up...”

I wasn’t entirely sure of having pronounced this terrifying confession out loud. The window was open, a light puff of air filled the curtain. I slipped away through its undulations.

“I deprived my mother and father of bananas.”

I was sitting sideways, unable to stand the sight of his face after such a sordid confession. Yet, instead of leaping up, instead of covering me with opprobrium, he gently asked: “You never talk about your mom and dad, what were they like?”

The question seemed too intimate, people didn’t ask such questions behind the Wall. These tender diminutives, “mom and dad”, did not correspond to my memories but I nevertheless made an effort.

I tried to describe my parents – first, I set the scene, a standard apartment in a slab of concrete, with the standard furnishings. I put myself inside it, with my father, my mother... three flavorless socialist lives, immobilized by fear.

There were two kinds of life: the life of Party members and everyone else’s life, my parents’ lives. The latter remained forever unfulfilled. Sooner or later, non-membership was an invisible but decisive obstacle to its evolution, putting an end to one’s studies, blocking one’s career. Yet, despite the endless series of compromises and renouncements, these lives had retained a hard core – a knot of resistance.

I hadn’t known a Party member’s life. It was free of certain difficulties and took place in relative comfort. Party members ate better than we did, they had more objects, greater freedom of movement... This life was easier to live but its core had been removed and the void left where the core used to be was filled with remorse.

My account remained cold, theoretical. I was unable to personalize it, to conceive of my parents other than as non-members, outside of the Party. I couldn't individualize my lot from the common lot of socialism.

In the camp, the only way to deal with my hunger was to deny it. "I'm not hungry," I repeated and ultimately I persuaded myself of it. Food prompted two types of reaction: hysterical reactions and obsessive ones. The hysterics threw themselves on it as soon as it arrived and devoured it all. For my part, I had the obsessive reflex that has remained with me to this day: I ate nothing, I set everything aside. I saved up. It was horrible, when I think about it now, it was madness.

My obsessive savings bought me a reward: I treated myself to little feasts now and then. It only added to the pleasure when the others no longer had anything to eat. I hid myself well. I spread out a rag to serve as a tablecloth, I cut the piece of bread in tiny pieces, tiny slices. I mixed what remained of the soup, carrots, potatoes, sometimes beet jam. I spread it on my slices of bread and savored it. I was happy.

This game was dangerous because the others always tried to steal my savings but it gave my life some zest. Sometimes, I was invited by two young girls, two radiantly beautiful sisters with whom I was in love. When they had a party, they invited me and I joined them with my petits-fours.

Food was the major obsession. It was necessary to familiarize oneself with the stores, the products likely to arrive, the days and hours of delivery. It was necessary to hit it off with saleswomen in order to obtain this precious information and thereby create a cartography of hunger. One had to cross the town twice over to find meat. One had to keep an eye out and buy whatever was available rather than a specific product. Women's handbags always contained a shopping bag. A good part of their life was devoted to acquiring food.

"I was useless in shopping," I said, sadly. "I always disappointed my mother."

When I arrived at the butcher's, nothing was left but lard. I didn't do a good job defending my place in line. I was shortchanged or cheated when the meat was weighed.

"Socialism had a specific way of starving you, by chronic insufficiency, a random distribution that fueled a permanent state of stress... It kept us off balance."



## Vladimir LEVCHEV

is the author of 15 books of poetry published in Bulgaria and five books of poetry in the United States, a book of essays, as well as three novels. He was born on October 17, 1957, in Sofia, Bulgaria. He graduated from the English Language High School and the Art Academy in Sofia in 1982. He worked as an editor of English language literature with Narodna Kultura Publishers between 1982 and 1989. Levchev published *Glas*, a "samizdat", underground magazine for politics and culture, banned by the communist authorities. After November 10, 1989, Levchev was deputy editor-in-chief of *Literaturen vestnik* weekly, and general coordinator of Free Poetry Society. In 1994 he won a Fulbright scholarship and went to Washington, DC, where he got an MFA in creative writing from American University. During his stay in the US, Levchev taught literature and writing at University of Maryland, George Washington University, and Central High School (P.G. County), as well as Bulgarian Language at FSI (Department of State). His poems, translated by the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Henry Taylor, were published in several books of poetry. Since 2007, Levchev has been teaching literature and writing at the American University in Bulgaria, in Blagoevgrad. His first novel *Marcos: The Balkan Prince* was published in Bulgaria in 2000; a second edition appeared in 2006.

## Bibliography

### In English:

#### Books:

*The Refuge*. Arlington, VA: Gival Press, 2011. (Poems by Vladimir Levchev)

*The Rainbow Mason*. Charlottesville, VA: Cornerstone Press, 2005. (Poems by Vladimir Levchev)

*Heavenly Balkans*. Washington, D.C.: Argon House Press, 2002. (Poems by Vladimir Levchev)

*Black Book of the Endangered Species*. Washington, D.C.: Word Works, 1999. (Poems by Vladimir Levchev, translated by Pulitzer-Prize winning poet Henry Taylor)

*Leaves from the Dry Tree*. Merrick, New York: Cross-Cultural Communications, 1996. (Poems by Vladimir Levchev, translated by Pulitzer-Prize winning poet Henry Taylor)

“The New Bulgarian Literature: Deconstructing the Pyramid”. *Bulgaria in Transition*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998. (Edited by John D. Bell)

His poems are published in Russian, German, French, Greek, Turkish, Polish, Hungarian, Punjabi, Slovenian, and Hebrew. Many poems by Vladimir Levchev are published also in different anthologies and magazines in the USA and the UK.

### In Bulgarian:

#### Books of Fiction:

*The Man and the Shadow*. (A novel.) Sofia: Ciela Publ. 2012

*2084*. (A novel.) Plovdiv: Zhanet-45, 2009

*Krali Marko: The Balkan Prince*. (A novel.) Sofia: St. Kliment Univ. Press, 2001, Second Edition: Plovdiv: Zhanet-45, 2006

He is author of 17 books of poetry, and three non-fiction books.



## MARCO: THE BALKAN PRINCE

### Synopsis

*Marco: The Balkan Prince* is a quasi-historical novel of about 50,000 words. It is based on Medieval Serbian, Macedonian, and Bulgarian folklore, history and mythology.

The plot of the novel exploits a large and diverse body of Medieval songs about a mythical hero, Marco Kraljevic or Krali Marco, who was a real historical personality, prince of the town of Prilep in Macedonia, in the 14th century. The songs, mostly Serbian and Bulgarian, glorify the Balkan ruler, who was actually a Turkish vassal, and turn him into a supernatural hero fighting against the Turks.

The real story of the marginal feudal lord from the time of the Ottoman invasion of the Balkans is ironically juxtaposed in the novel to his fantastic image in the epic songs, in the mind of the common people. Marco, the hero, fights not only the Turks, but also three-headed dragons. He is helped by forest nymphs who are in love with him.

The novel consists of 27 chapters in which a complicated plot based on the folk songs is developed. There are also eight commentary chapters, dispersed among the narrative chapters, in which the sceptical voice of the historian argues with the poetic voice of the folk singer. The commentary chapters discuss real history, including the Balkan wars of the 20th century, Balkan mythology and psychology.

Some of the songs glorifying Marco date back to the time of the real prince, the time of the disintegration of the powerful Serbian Empire of king Stephan Dushan and the Ottoman invasion, including the defeat of the Balkan Christian rulers in the Kosovo battle. The novel suggests that the real prince Marco was influenced by the songs. The marginal historical ruler constantly tries to catch up with his own fantastic image in the popular mind and the songs of his people.

Marco is a charismatic childish person, who – while mostly preoccupied with drinking wine and flirting with women – desperately wants to live up to the image of his people about him; and he manages to do so, because facts and fantasies, reality and dreams are one – both in his own mind, and in the minds of his people. *The Balkan Prince* is an entertaining novel about fantastic adventures, written in a light, ironical tone, and using a specific local Macedonian dialect in the direct speech; but it is also a novel of ideas dealing with Balkan psychology and the relationship between fantasy and reality in general.



## Marco: the Balkan Prince

*Excerpt / Translated by Vladimir Levchev*

First Song  
Royal Birth

A fifteen-foot-long dinner table, piled up with silver pitchers and cups, and ceramic plates, was set on a broad wooden terrace with marble columns. The candles were burning out and crackling in the morning breeze, their wax trickling onto the red velvet tablecloth and the polished floor boards. In the corner, five bandore players were pulling their strings with effort, their eyes closing. Most of the guests were long asleep, either in the guest bedrooms or on the table, snoring loudly. Only a few people were still awake and roaring with laughter.

Suddenly a blood-red sun blazed up over the green hills across from them. It was the Day of St. Peter and Paul. The first ray of sun flared on the reflector of an oil lamp hanging on the wall. Roosters and peacocks were crowing down in the garden, strutting through ivy and rose bushes under dark sycamore tree crowns. From the top of the rocky hill in the distance, the sun lit the blinding white wall of the monastery behind the cypress trees.

Below the Castle walls, the town of Prilep was waking up with its narrow cobblestone streets, the bazaar, the church, the white stone houses of the rich, and further down, in the dry bare land, the dark dug-outs and shacks of the

serfs, who were already out working in the field.

The few men at the table were raising their big silver cups full of red wine, which the yawning cupbearer was pouring for them from a wrought silver pitcher. All of the feasting men, including those already sleeping on the table, had their sable fur hats on. The only exception was the bishop of Pelagonia who was wearing his black cassock and had a kamelaukion on his head. He too was raising a wine cup. The mustached drunk men had not taken off their hats, but their white silk shirts, knee-length and embroidered in crimson and gold, were half-unbuttoned. One of the laughing men was the host, Vukashin Mrnyavchevich, the King of Prilep. He had taken off his long sleeveless fur coat, adorned with gold braid and his shirtsleeves were rolled up. The guests' shining swords, with inlaid sheaths bearing Greek and Slavic inscriptions, were left on the floor by the chairs. King Vukashin raised his cup to his brother Ivan Ouglesha, who had recently been appointed by the emperor as the Despot of Seres, and to their close friend Despot Goyko, and said to them:

"Brothers, don't fall asleep! Let's drink to our youth! Hey, I am now a father now, and that's the end of my freedom. . . But remember what a life we had just a year ago!"

"Vulkashin! Ivan! Let's drink to the girls of Thessalonica who made us brothers!" the excited Despot Goyko cried.

"And don't forget the girls of Skopje, we should drink to them too!" Ivan Ouglesha added.

"Oh, and shouldn't we drink to the Tirnovo girls?" said the smiling Vukashin. "And. . .who else?"

"The noble ladies of Constantinople!" the three men said together and laughed.

"Please, gentlemen! I am starting to suspect that you haven't confessed all of your sins to me yet." the bishop said with a feigned reproach "But I am ready to hear you!"

The three brave heroes immediately started confessing their sins. . .

This was happening on the third day of the feast King Vukashin organized on the occasion of the birth of his first son.



## Vesela Lyakhova

was born in 1961 in Pazardzhik. She received a degree in Bulgarian philology from Sofia University in 1985. In 1998, she specialized in applied management and international relations at Sofia University.

She writes mostly fiction, as well as journalism. Since 1980 she has been publishing short stories in the newspapers and recently on the Internet, and journalism for the periodicals issues. Her short stories deal with contemporary topics, related to the moral problems of our society and human relations in general.

Her first book, a collection of novellas entitled *Next to the Sun*, was published in 1993. In 1987, its first, eponymous, novella, was awarded the Tzvetan Zangov Literary Prize for young authors.

*Refugees* is her first novel, published in 2013. It aroused the interest of readers with the fact that it is the first Bulgarian literary rendition of the de-Bulgarianization of the Aegean region in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and of the assimilation of compact masses of Bulgarians, which accompanied it, and of the communist government's political action against the self-identity of the refugees. The novel has been nominated for a number of national awards. It received the Hristo G. Danov National Award (2014) and the National Award for fiction of the Bulgarian Culture-Portal (2014).



### REFUGEES

#### Synopsis

The novel *Refugees* is an epic tale devoted to exploring Bulgaria's national fate and to a tragic moment in history: the unification of Aegean Macedonia with Bulgaria in 1941, the Drama Uprising during the fall of the same year, the Bulgarian loss of that territory in 1944, and the expulsion of Bulgarians from their birthplaces, their suffering after the establishment of the communist regime in Bulgaria. These are the chronological historical events the plot is built on. War, conflicts, political repressions, resettlement, along with love, hate, death, marriages, births – all of this lives breathlessly on the pages of the novel. The fate of the

heroes of the novel is similar to the destiny of the Sudeten Germans and of every people on the world who are suffering the arbitrariness of power.

Taking account of all points of view, including antagonistic ones, *Refugees* offers a new perspective on certain traumatic issues of Bulgarian history. Focusing on the complex nature of human beings, the traditional conflicts are represented without idealizing one's own nation, or demonizing the other. Important questions that are current today are raised as well, for example: the maintenance of identity and personal dignity, and the defense of truth and justice; how should a state relate to the minorities within its borders; about a minority's loyalty towards its mother country on the one hand and towards its homeland on the other; about the limits of self-definition and tolerance; about political violence and repression; about human collisions with the state authority. Starting from an ordinary person's point of view, *Refugees* explores the national topics as universal and understandable by every European reader. Talking about explosive issues from the past, *Refugees* continues the literary traditions in the works of Balkan writers such as Ivo Andric, Nikos Kazantzakis, Vuk Draskovic, Vera Mutafchieva, and Orhan Pamuk.

## Refugees

*Excerpt / Translated by Evgenia Pancheva*

Elena rushed out of the barn, the door creaking behind her. She ran in the dark towards the front room under the stairs. The door was yawning and the dim light of a gas lamp quivering in the draught came from within. Her heart sank with apprehension. The room was empty; the table was laid for dinner but the in-laws were not there. Elena peeped behind the curtain: the twins were sleeping on the only plank-bed. She stepped back in front of the curtain and stood there with her hands on her waist, looking around worriedly.

“Where did everyone vanish in just half an hour?” she whispered to herself.

Just as she was wondering what to do, her mother-in-law appeared at the door. Her black headcloth had fallen upon her shoulders and her long petticoat was soiled with mud. She was out of breath, pale, her eyes wide open with horror. The two women looked at each other and in a split second Elena knew something terrible had happened.

“Where have you been, mother?”

“They kidnapped Kyrios Georgi,” whimpered Shishkov’s wife. Without fixing her headcloth or brushing her skirts off, she took her head in her hands and burst into sobs.

“Tell me what happened.” Elena went up to her. The old woman had totally shriveled and grown smaller; she looked like a bird ducked in water, trembling with the cold and the fear she had felt.

“It happened so ... I went out to seek him, but there was no trace of him...” She took out a handkerchief from her bosom and blew her tears in it. “One of those, Lazo’s men, came. I had just put the children to bed. He appeared at the door and said: ‘Uncle Georgi, let me ask you something.’ He didn’t want to go inside, he saw the table and didn’t. I said to myself, good Lord, we used to feed strangers at our table, and now it’s not even for guests to come and sit at people’s table.”

Elena didn’t say a word.

“I didn’t like that man the moment I set my eyes on him,” the old woman went on, lifting the handkerchief she had turned into a ball to her eyes, her nose, her mouth. “And there was a reason: he was tricking people into going to Kumanovo, to Macedonia, to America. Arrogant and sly, his eyes like Argiria Choykoleva’s, roving, sizing you up. Makes you sick.”

Apostol came into the room. The old woman got up and met him with the words, “Go, son and try by yourself, go find him ... Your father!”

“Why, find him where?” He was surprised but quickly grasped what was going on.

“How do I know? I have been looking for him all over the neighborhood. The truck’s been everywhere. I walked my legs off to chase it. Go to the square, I hope you find him there.”

She brought him his coat, pushed it into his hands and whispered with the despair of the doomed: “Please, you go try as well...”

Apostol looked at his wife, then at his mother, shook his head, and left the room. In tears, Shishkov’s wife went on talking and wiping her face but they kept streaming out: “Come with me, he said, for a moment. They went out and I could hear them arguing. This man, I thought, couldn’t he find a better time to seek support for that politics of theirs than now when we are going to dine. Then they stopped talking and got silent, and I waited for Jorgos to come back. I waited and waited, but nobody pushed the door. He must have gone to the privy, I thought, before coming back. You know how he is, he doesn’t like loitering around in the cold, and now that he’s out, he must have decided he’d better do it than go out again.

“I could hear a car passing, a big car, judging by the noise, but I didn’t imagine that noise and the delay could have been related. So I kept waiting - for him, and for you, too. At one time something started nagging inside me: I didn’t worry about you two but why wasn’t *he* coming? Suddenly I remembered: the noise had stopped after the car drove off. God! I jumped to my feet and rushed out. It was pitch-dark outside. No chance to see him. No trace of him. I shouted his name, then yours. When nobody answered, I felt scared. You know what’s going on here. Lazo Ayanovsky is recruiting people for Macedonia. Macedonia needs subjects, he says. They abducted my spouse! And I ran around the streets, looking for that truck, to rescue your father... And he was nowhere to be found ... Tonight they came to our neighborhood, sneaking around. Last night they visited the one below. That’s what they do: you just think that the evil is over, you begin to forget it, and it pops up somewhere else, with other people, disguised and kind, but evil!”

The old woman kept wailing and weeping. It was strange where all those words and tears sprang from.

“That’s how they do it,” Shishkov’s wife kept saying, then stopping, and then repeating again and again. “They go around a couple of houses in that truck

and, if they manage to trick somebody, they do not waste their time but pick them up and take off! I know how they are.”

“But people are not dumb cattle, are they,” objected Elena.

“Exactly!” Shishkov’s wife looked up but only in order to confirm her words. “Exactly! Like dumb cattle ... When one man treats another with brute force, both turn into beasts!” Then she laid her head upon her clasped hands: “What punishment is this, O Lord, to be expelled from everywhere! We were Bulgarians there, they call us Greeks here, and still others name us Macedonians. And we belong nowhere!”

The old woman was silent; so small and helpless, she was a sorry sight. Elena stared in front of herself. Suddenly she felt tired, tired to death of the disorderly and wretched life around, of the ugly, half-bare room and its sooty walls, and its pitifully creaking woodwork. She detested this house and, thinking of how uncomfortable it was, she realized how much she had loved the pretty tidy house back home in Greece, with its big veranda and black windows like eyes. The old woman had good reason to weep so disconsolately, to grieve and regret. Elena averted her eyes. All she could see through the window was the darkness and a pale moon, veiled in clouds. It was quiet; nothing suggested what evil was being done to people. The old woman on the couch kept sobbing. “How would this story end?” Elena asked herself. They fled from Kobalishte, but the end of hardship was still far away. She remembered the terrible rumors of 1943, of how the Jews of Drama were taken away. It had happened at midnight again, with trucks driving from house to house and people hiding, everybody hoping to avoid the penalty by themselves.

But this meant making the oppressors’ lives easier. Had those victims spoken out loudly, they would have realized they were many. Their cry would have reverberated in the night; rather than wait fearfully to be caught one by one, they would have given courage to one another.

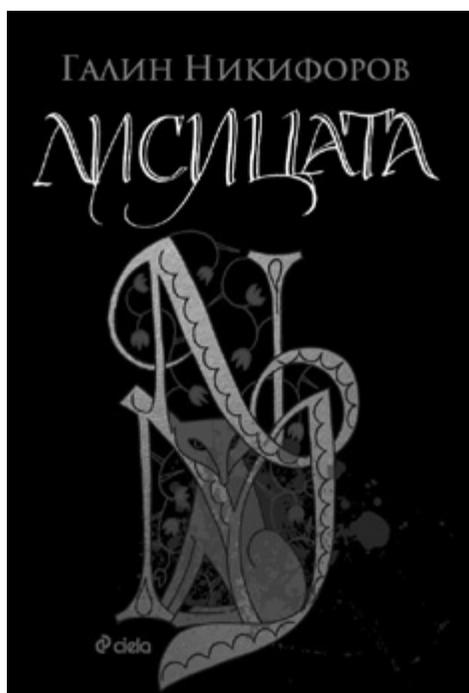
Elena rose to fetch wood for the extinguished fire in the stove. Near the table, something crunched under her feet. She bent. It was Shishkov’s rosary. She picked it up and gave it to her mother-in-law. Seeing it, she burst into tears.



## Galin NIKIFOROV

Born in 1968, Galin Nikiforov is the author of six novels and one of Bulgaria’s most celebrated authors. In 2003, he won the Development Prize for the best new Bulgarian novel with his debut novel *Moderately Gentle*. In 2006, he was nominated for the two most prestigious literary competitions: the Novel of the Year Award and the Helikon Prize for his novel *Good Boy*. In 2008, his third novel appeared, *The Photographer: Obscura Reperta*, which was again nominated for the Novel of the Year Award, the Helikon Prize, Elias Canetti Prize and Hristo G. Danov Award. The following year, his fourth novel, *Losers’ Summer*, was published; the work won the most prestigious award for Bulgarian prose, the Novel of the Year Award. In 2011, he published his fifth novel *House of Clowns*, which won the Elias Canetti Prize for achievements in literature and was again nominated for the Helikon Prize for Bulgarian prose. In late 2014, his sixth and most recent novel *The Fox* was released and was also nominated for the Helikon Prize and the Hristo G. Danov Award.

Galina Nikiforov’s writing shows careful research of the subject matter during the writing of each book. His work typically takes on eternal themes: death, extreme states, and the striving towards art, impossible love, human solitude and the strength of the human spirit. He is loved both by readers and critics alike for his exotic stories, his use of diverse styles and most of all for the humanity evident in his works.



## THE FOX

### *Synopsis*

The novel has two plotlines that develop in parallel. The first traces the unusual 700-year-long life of Nora Volpe, while the other is modern-day police investigation led by Victor Treyman – a police psychologist who is desperately fighting his feeling of guilt over a murder he committed as a child.

When Nora was still a child, her father left her alone in the woods to get rid of her. After three days, utterly exhausted, she fought for her life against a fox and managed to strangle it, and then she drank its blood to slake her thirst. Years later, she realized that

because of the horrors she had experienced and because of the fox blood, she did not grow old like other people.

Through the centuries, Nora seems to travel all over the world: she goes to Italy, France, Japan. Whenever she finds trouble, her adversaries are being killed. As she tries to figure out how these murders were committed, she comes across undeniable evidence that someone is watching over her, guarding her.

In the present day, Victor Treyman, along with Elza, the partner assigned to him, are investigating the murder of an art collector. Treyman manages to uncover the killer's fingerprints and his relationship with the madame of a luxurious brothel; after that, he uncovers evidence of three more unsolved murders from the past, pointed out to him by Nora Volpe, whom he meets following an interrogation. All three victims were strangled with a black plastic cord and seem to be the work of a single killer. Treyman grows close to Nora and realizes that he is crazy about her, while at the same time he starts becoming obsessed with his feeling of guilt. He goes to her house and there he sees her pictures, artefacts of immortality and fox symbols, which surprise him. Having carried her secret down through the centuries, Nora falls in love with Treyman and soon realizes that she does not want to be immortal anymore: just like the

fox, who, according to the Chinese legend, knew the secret of immortality but did not want to live forever, she wants to find someone to love and to die with him. But also by solving the art collector's murder, she wants to find the person who has been helping her and protecting her these 700 long years.

Treyman unexpectedly discovers that there are two killers – one copycat, linked for years to Madame Eliza, and the other, whom all the clues and facts point to: Nora Volpe. When she is arrested and put in prison, Treyman is crushed and after saying goodbye to her, he goes to the orphanage where he spent his childhood to make up for the sin that has always tormented his conscience – that he left his victim unburied. When he buries the bones of the boy he killed, he is struck by the unbelievable insight that the real killer has left his “signature” at every one of the crime scenes: the black cords used to strangle the victims were shaped like algebraic curves.

He again gets in touch with Elza, who is the only one who can help him. But it turns out that she already knows everything – because she committed those three murders to protect Nora, and she used the names of those algebraic curves as her electronic addresses, which she changed after each murder. She goes over to Treyman's house, stuns him, and ties him to a chair. Then she tells him the whole story and he finds out that Elza is Nora's mother, who is also immortal, which is why she has always lived near her and protected her, disguised as various people around her. Then, she disappears without a trace, thus leaving the responsibility for Nora's happiness in Treyman's hands.

The novel ends with Treyman and Nora, who are together once again, visiting an old church near Kilkenny, Ireland, where Nora spent her childhood.

## The Fox

Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel

Only after he sat down on the chair did he raise his eyes and look towards the interior of the cell.

Nora was sitting on a battered stool with her back to the bars, her elbows were propped on a high, narrow table piled with make-up, silver lipstick tubes and compacts full of colorful powders, and she was making herself up intently. She was wearing a white sleeveless T-shirt and dark-green prison overalls with the straps hanging down. To her right was her bed, covered in a brown blanket – above it was a rack of toiletries, while on the opposite wall a rumped poster of Lady Gaga, left behind by the previous inhabitant, rounded out the furnishings.

“To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys...” Nora suddenly said, without turning around, in a soft, monotonous voice, as if reading from a book. “And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world...”

Treyman looked at her, puzzled – in the first instant he couldn't grasp the meaning of her words, but after that he realized it was a quote from *The Little Prince*. And his pounding heart slowed its rhythm – like a frightened cat, stroked by a child's hand... While walking towards the cell, he had been filled with questions, but when he saw Nora and heard her dream-like words, he felt something in himself snap and the anger and disappointment that had built up in recent days flowed out through the crack like dirty water.

“I'm glad to see you're in good spirits,” he said quietly.

“And I'm glad that you're glad,” she replied, still with her back towards him, and kept making herself up, hunched towards the mirror in front of her. “I knew you would come. But I didn't know when. If I had known, I would have put on my nicest overalls, I would have ordered the best from the prison kitchen and gotten out the silver...”

Treyman knit his fingers together behind him and leaned against the uncomfortable backrest of the chair. He sensed that he could stay like that for hours, watching Nora put on her make-up, watching her shoulders and the muscles of her exquisite neck tremble slightly from her hand's efforts, watching

how her short, silky hair had gotten slightly tousled, lending something careless and girlish to her look.

“I came to say goodbye.”

Nora's hand, clutching the miniature eyeliner, hesitated for a moment, then continued its smooth, exquisite movement.

“I thought you would come to see me from time to time. I would've been glad of it.”

“I'm not that kind of person. When something is over, it's over.”

“There are some things you can never be sure are truly over. But since that's what you think...” she said vaguely. Her voice was even, not revealing any emotions.

Treyman fell silent, wondering what to say to her. The questions and the insights he had arrived at had suddenly scattered like dust.

“I wanted... I wanted to ask you lots of things, but I don't think there's any point anymore. I can't hold anything against you. Not the lies, not the whole charade you played out. I just want to say that... that you don't owe me anything.” He swallowed hard and shook his head. “I just wanted to make sure you're OK. That's all.”

As he said it, a warm wave spread through his chest, draining his strength, and he felt how much he loved her. His arms went numb from the feeling and his whole body seemed heavy.

Nora did not reply for a long time, instead concentrating her whole attention on her make-up. Finally, she said: “I'm not OK, if that's really what you're asking. Not at all.”

“Because of the fits?”

“In part... when I'm in a closed space for any longer period of time, they get really bad. I think that during the short while we were together, you managed to see the consequences of three or four of these fits, even though you never saw the fits themselves.” With her back still to Treyman, her voice sounded strange: it echoed in the small space of the cell, losing its density and scattering all around as if passed through a filter. “The doctors call my condition ‘ethnic psychosis,’ very similar to clinical lycanthropy. Maybe you've heard of it.”

“Clinical lycanthropy?” Treyman asked, stunned. “When a person thinks they are an animal?!”

“Yes, exactly. And guess what kind of animal I think I am?”

He couldn't see her face, so he couldn't figure out if this was just her strange sense of humor at play, or whether her subtle eccentricity had gotten the best

of her again.

“Given my recent discoveries, I would bet it’s a fox.”

Nora set down the eyeliner and picked up a little mascara brush, lifting it towards her eyes.

“If I wanted to sound sarcastic, I would exclaim: ‘How insightful!’... But I don’t want to.”

Treyman sensed that the conversation wasn’t going in the direction he wanted it to, but he didn’t have the strength to resist.

“I learned quite a bit about foxes from you. But clearly not everything...”

Her hand made several movements typical of a woman shaping her eyelashes.

“Many years ago, when I lived in Japan, everyone called me Kitsune-san precisely because of these fits, which I’d had since I was a child,” she explained in an even tone. “In Japan, that’s what they call women possessed by the fox-spirit. And the state these women fall into is called *kitsunetsuki*. They say that the spirit enters their bodies through their breasts or their fingernails, and makes them strip naked and speak in tongues. But the Japanese, just like the prison doctors here, have no way of knowing exactly what the nature of my fits is...” Nora moved her head slightly to the right and left, without taking her eyes off the mirror, in order to see how the light hit her make-up, then continued applying mascara. “When they first brought me to the cell, I warned the sergeants-on-duty and the field nurse who passes as a doctor here, to leave me alone and to only give me fruit and plain rice when I fall into that state, if they don’t want me to scratch their eyes out or break my fingers.”

Treyman looked at her, frowning. “Is there any way I can help you?”

“No.” She set the little brush on top of a powder box. “It has to do with my blood and I know what the right medicine is, but this time... this time I’ll skip it. I don’t want to live like I have until now. Not anymore.”

“I don’t understand a word of what you’re saying.”

“But you could say that I’m mysterious, duplicitous and unpredictable. I’d like that...”

She wiped her fingers on a cottonball and slowly turned around on the stool.

When he saw her face, Treyman unconsciously pulled back, slightly startled.

“You’ll never cease to surprise me,” he pulled himself together and shook his head. “Not even now...”



## Momchil NIKOLOV

(b. 1970) graduated in medicine, but for the past fifteen years has been primarily dedicated to writing. He has published eight books: *Travelers* (a novella), *Short Stories*, *Fragments of a Room* (short stories), *Mad Doris* (short stories), *Hash Oil* (a novel), *The Top Floor* (a novel), *The Spherical Fish* (a novel), and *Machinery for Love* (a novel).

All of Momchil Nikolov’s books have gone through multiple reprints and enjoy wide popularity among readers and critics. He has won numerous literary awards, including the most prestigious prize in Bulgaria, the Helikon Prize, for *The Spherical Fish*. Critics have compared Nikolov’s writing, with its surrealistic, seriocomic flavor, to that of Haruki Murakami, Thomas Pynchon and Tom Robbins – most likely thanks to his knack for filtering psychological stories through the prism of the mysterious, the mystical and the paranormal, all served up with a sense of humor. An excerpt from his latest novel *Dreams* was published in the first issue of the Bulgarian edition of *Granta* magazine alongside authors such as Paul Auster, Stephen King, Arthur Miller, and Don DeLillo.

Besides literature, he also writes screenplays.



## THE SPHERICAL FISH

### *Synopsis*

In various places across the US, an unusual flying object has been sighted. On his way to Florida, Marvin, an agent from the secret services assigned to the case, gets into an accident and suffers amnesia – the only thing he can remember is that he has to find the flying man. Marvin settles in Tarpon Springs, Florida – the place where the flying man was last seen.

His search of the area brings him to Crystal River. There he meets a beautiful girl, Leah, who unexpectedly shows great interest in him. After hearing his story, Leah tells him the flying man had lived in Crystal River and rented a room from Frieda Zimmerman, an elderly artist from New York. However, he was

killed in a particularly brutal way by a young man named Fabien with serious psychiatric problems – torched by a flamethrower bought from an antique store.

Marvin visits Frieda and manages to win her trust. She shows him videotapes on which she has recorded the life of her boarder, whose name was Ramiel. To understand why she spied on Ramiel, Marvin must hear the story of her life – the life of a girl who thanks to a strange chain of events ends up in New York and spends almost her entire life there, torn between her father's dream of her becoming a physicist and her own dream.

From Frieda, and later from the videotapes, Marvin finds out something exceptionally unbelievable – Ramiel had been pregnant. He carried the fetus and gave birth to it in the ocean. A few days after that, he was tragically killed by Fabien. Frieda, searching for explanations, has reached the conclusion that Ramiel was an angel. Despite his strong attraction to Leah, Marvin goes back to Tarpon Springs to search for evidence supporting Frieda's story, as outlandish as it may sound. He goes to the St. Nicholas Church to see Father John Alexandropoulos, who is famous for his collection of antique books on religious subjects.

Father John recalls the mass suicide of a cult tied to the Order of the Golden Dawn that had taken place 30 years earlier. A strange book was found on the

cult's ranch – a manuscript in Latin from the 10th-12th century, which spoke of the "People of God." Father John figures out that by "People of God," the anonymous author means those whom Enoch called "The Watchers" – 200 angels who were banished to the earth by God in ancient times and chained up for 70 generations as punishment. According to Father John, the sentence is already up and the Watchers, of whom Ramiel was one, are now free.

The book found on the ranch touches on some of the aspects of the "People of God's" reproduction, claiming they are bi-gendered and can fertilize themselves like hermaphroditic plants. The women are used only to carry the fetus in their wombs, which the People of God place there with their hands. The anonymous author also describes another option for carrying the fetus to term which, according to him, is wide-spread among the People of God: they can carry it themselves, in which case the fetus develops in their stomachs. The pregnancy would last several months, at which point the fetus would break through the skin in the region of the stomach, turn itself upright, crawl to the Person of God's breast and begin nursing. This, however, could only happen in a "paradisiacal climate" – a purely aquatic environment which maintains the proper temperature for a long time.

Marvin suddenly realizes what had happened: The pregnant Watcher Ramiel had given birth in Crystal Bay, which was known for the constantly high temperature of its waters – which was why the manatees winter there. He had not only given birth there, but clearly had foreseen his impending death and had left his child to be brought up by the manatees. But what kind of creature exactly had Ramiel given birth to? And where could Marvin discover the answer to this question?

On the trail of the mysterious suicide cult, Marvin comes across an organization which goes by the acronym H.O.G.D. – The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. The organization's headquarters is in the town of Elfers. Marvin goes there and has an extremely strange experience, which could be described as a journey through space and time. He first goes to a house where a woman and an autistic boy live. Tina, the woman, tells him about a dream in which she saw a glowing silhouette above her. She woke up with a scar on her chest – in the same shape as the silhouette from her dream. A month later, Tina started dating a man who turned out to be an initiate of the Order of the Golden Dawn. He took her to one of their angelic conferences, where suddenly an angel by the name of Ramiel began communication with Tina. He told her about the structure of the universe, about the energy that moves everything, about the countless worlds and dimensions. In the end, he informed Tina that she was carrying his child, but that she was not the child's mother – she was simply an incubator. That night when she had dreamed of him, he had placed the embryo inside her. She tells Marvin that on the following day, she and the child must leave. They will go to the desert and live there for a

year. Then everyone will die. Only the boy will survive. His son. Fabien. Marvin is confused – everything that Tina is telling him should have happened thirty years earlier. Tina explains that time is not a straight line with a clear-cut beginning and end, but something more complicated.

As proof of this, Marvin suddenly ends up in present-day Elfers, in a shopping mall where the headquarters of H.O.G.D. is located. Marvin tries to learn more about the story of the mass suicide in the desert, but the hucksterish boss denies that the organization has any connection whatsoever with the cult – all that happened a long time ago. Marvin leaves, but on the lower level he notices the Order's souvenir shop, where he buys an Egyptian stylus – just like the one the god Toth, whom the order honors, is always drawn holding.

Back in Tarpon Springs, Marvin can't figure out how he could have been in Elfers simultaneously thirty years ago and now. Everything seems like a dream, but he finds the stylus in his pocket. Marvin realizes with horror that on his chest there is a tattoo that looks exactly like Tina's scar. Marvin is terribly confused, as reality seems to be getting entangled with his visions. The world around him takes on different shapes and Marvin begins to doubt it. His behavior becomes so bizarre that the neighbors call the police. With the police come the men in white coats, who whisk him off to a psychiatric clinic. There is someone else in his hospital room, sleeping with the covers pulled up over his head. Despite the doctor's explanations that Marvin has a serious condition which requires ongoing treatment, Marvin is absolutely convinced that he is perfectly healthy. He goes on a hunger strike and refuses to speak in protest. His roommate continues to stubbornly hide beneath his blankets. Marvin tears off the blanket – the man hiding beneath it is Fabien. He tells Marvin the story from his point of view. He reveals why he torched Ramiel, his father – and what the angel had told him before dying: That the heavenly tailor is already in our midst and he would do that which they, the Watchers, had not the strength to complete. He would impose order. Divide the heavens from the earth. Darkness from light. Good from bad. After this conversation with Fabien, Marvin realizes that things have finally come full circle and that he is part of it. He also realizes what he has to do. He places the stylus on top of the tattoo. It is the key – while he is the keyhole. It works – Marvin begins hearing countless voices. The voices are reading simultaneously from various and numerous books. From those books in which everything is written – from the first to the last day. The loudest of those voices is reading the book of the future. It tells of the round fish, born of Ramiel and brought up by manatees. The heavenly tailor, who has come to change the world. Marvin starts listening to this voice. He begins writing down everything he hears. The story of the earth in future times. The detailed description of the End and the New Beginning. With this description of the future, which has already taken place, the novel *The Spherical Fish* begins.

## The Spherical Fish

*Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel*

When the sun stops, the time in the Rocky Mountains will be 6:20. In the morning. The newlyweds from Denver, Jessica and Charlie, snuggling under an Indian blanket pulled up to their chins, will be sitting on a wooden bench in front of a hunting lodge, watching the sunrise. It will be beautiful.

The first rays will appear beyond the ridge, lighting up the distant, snow-capped peaks. The birds will be waking up and starting to sing. Jessica and Charlie will be holding hands. They will kiss each other's frostbitten ears and will wait for the sun to rise. They will watch for a whole hour, drinking instant coffee, but the sun will not budge. Something is going on – Charlie will begin to suspect and will grab his hunting rifle, just in case.

They will have breakfast. The panic inside them will rise. Charlie will kick himself for not taking at least a small transistor radio, so they could find out what is going on, for crying out loud. He will suggest that this is just a mirage, but it won't be very convincing. Somewhere around the fifth hour, Jessica will burst out crying, while Charlie, to calm her down and inspire her confidence, will start blasting away in all directions with his hunting rifle. Jessica, however, will not calm down. On the contrary, she will start bawling all the harder and will say that in her opinion, all that blasting away is stupid.

Charlie will stop shooting, he will admit slightly irritably that it really is pretty stupid, and he'll start thinking. Since he's a smart guy, he'll soon come up with something. He'll tell Jessica that they'll go down in the Guinness Book of World Records as the people who have watched the sunrise for the longest, and they'll be rich and famous. Impressed, Jessica will clap her hands and shut up instantly. Like most women, she, too, will consider herself artistic and will be dying to be rich and famous. A little while later, however, she will voice the doubt that they'll hardly believe them without proof. To this, Charlie will respond with remarkable logorrhea, in the end convincing her that if they both swear to it, the folks from Guinness will believe them.

The two of them will fall silent on the bench and continue gazing at the sunrise. They will hold hands and kiss each other's frostbitten ears. During the 25th hour, right when they will feel like falling asleep, something will happen. Over the ridge, where the sun should have risen, a distinctive golden fin will

appear. Over the course of ten minutes, the whole body of the Spherical Fish will reveal itself to the newlyweds' astonished gaze. The Spherical Fish will open its silent mouth, it will majestically turn its head south, it will flap its tail and swim off in that direction at high speed. It will leave behind a sort of pale green, slightly phosphorescent fog.

With sinister precision, which will rule out any randomness whatsoever, the Spherical Fish will mark the entire path it will traverse with that greenish fog. The path will be long and will cross over the Rocky Mountains, above the Pacific Ocean, Antarctica, the South Pole, the Indian Ocean, the island of Sumatra, the North China Plain, the Gobi Desert, the Central Siberian Plateau, the Arctic Ocean, and the North Pole.

Its lap around the earth will last around 24 hours, with the Spherical Fish moving in a straight line, never veering from the 106th meridian. The 106th meridian will be the astronomical border between day and night, established after the stopping of the sun. To put it simply, the territory trapped between 106° West longitude and 106° East longitude, encompassing the eastern part of America, Europe, Africa and a large part of Asia, will be light.

Between 106° East longitude and 106° West longitude, where Australia, the Pacific Coast of Asia and the whole Pacific Ocean lie, will be dark. In hours, the Spherical Fish will manage to transform this made-up, imaginary line, dividing darkness from light and day from night, into an actual barrier built of a thin layer of pale green, slightly phosphorescent fog.

According to the latest information, this wall, perpendicular to the earth's surface, will reach the height of the stratosphere – five to six miles at the poles and eleven at the equator. The barrier will possess the qualities of a semi-porous membrane – air and water will flow through it unperturbed. For everything else, however, living or otherwise, it will be impenetrable.

The barrier will be made up of nitrogen, oxygen, hydrogen and carbon, in the same ratio as those elements are found in the human body. The difference will be in the bonds between them – exceptionally strong, in practice turning the barrier into an indestructible wall. Only minutes after its appearance, the trouble will start – dozen of airplanes will smash into it.



## Radoslav PARUSHEV

was born on January 29, 1975, in Sofia. He graduated in law from Sofia University in 2000 and works as a lawyer in the sphere of intellectual property and telecommunications/new technologies law. In 2008, he founded his own law firm, Ovcharov & Parushev.

In 2003, before even publishing a book, thanks to his numerous stories in various media, the notorious magazine *Egoist* dubbed him “the best writer of his generation.” Along with Toma Markov, Stefan Ivanov and Momchil Nikolov, Parushev founded the informal literary group “fastlit” (*burzaliteratura*) in 2004. As part of “fastlit” he has taken part in several literary tours including public readings and literary performances in Plovdiv, Pazardzhik, Blagoevgrad, Ruse, Sozopol (at the 2005 Apollonia Art Festival), as well as in dozens of literary readings in Sofia.

In 2010 at the founding meeting of the Association of Writers in Bulgaria, Parushev was elected as the first chairman of the organization's Board of Directors. The organization itself aims to protect the interests of young Bulgarian authors.

Parushev won the Rashko Sugarev Prize for best short story in 2003. He has been nominated four times for the Helikon Prize, twice from the Ministry of Culture's Hristo G. Danov award, and twice was shortlisted for the Novel of the Year award.

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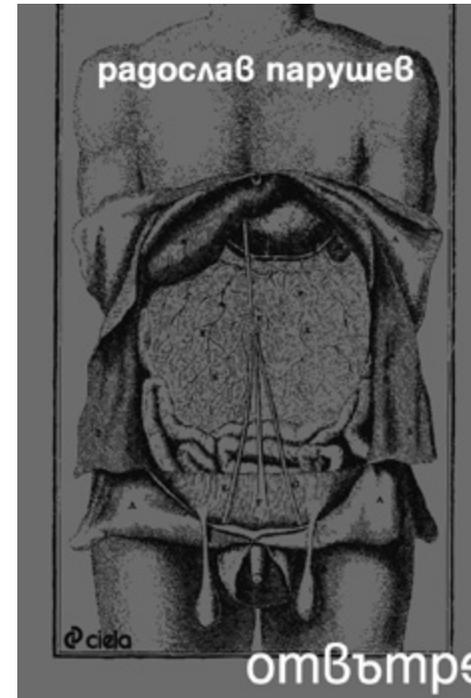
## FROM THE INSIDE

### Synopsis

What do Osama Bin Laden, the Bulgarian revolutionary Vasil Levski, and Radoslav Parushev have in common? The fact that all three of them are characters in Parushev's novel *From the Inside*.

Sofia, spring of 2014, the first days of World War Three. A snap parliamentary election is just around the corner, in which the Sports Block has the best chances. Against the backdrop of these dramatic and historic events, the population of the poorest and most corrupt country in Europe has focused its energy on the furious filming and watching of TV soap operas and "exceedingly unique reality formats." The victim of a frame-up, our hero is launched from the fake and rotten world of the Bulgarian television business directly into prison, where there is no alternate to brutal reality. There is only one way to survive – to stop caring about anything.

With his ultra-topical themes, his characteristic high literary style and uncompromising, aggressive language, Parushev – famous not only for his six previous books, as well as for his undisguised predilection for Dostoyevsky, Eco and Borges – has this time taken a serious crack at a bestseller.



## From the Inside

Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel

At the same time at a restaurant forty yards to the north that had opened up in the former royal palace, which before then had been a Turkish police station, at a table sat two people, who for their whole lives had in principle eaten shit, albeit metaphorically – otherwise they had eaten more or less normal human food, depending on the times – now, for example, the times were quite good, one of them, let's call him the Big-Time Producer, was having a bite to eat, delicately spearing carpaccio on a bed of speck, seasonal arugula and

oyster mushrooms, sprinkled with a dressing of cherry tomatoes, marjoram and caramelized baby carrots. His dinner companion, the Delegated Producer from TV8, was having homemade mascarpone on a block of seasonal paella, baby avocado and fresh golden olive oil steeped in coriander. So it's not like eating shit in real, non-metaphorical life.

"You do realize that you're fucking me over completely with that 500K kick-back you want, right?" The Big-Time Producer knit his brow and wiped his lips with an elegant napkin.

"Take it or leave it, man," the Delegated Producer from TV 8 laughed with his mouth full. "You're the one who wants to make a movie about Levski, not me. I don't want to shoot anything. TV8 will give you the money if I approve the project in the TV's name. I know how the scheme works, what part of it don't you understand?"

The Big-Time Producer is one of the main characters in this book, a man who looks fifty-ish (who actually is only forty-five, but snorts a lot of coke and gets drunk off his ass – more than three times a week – he really loves greasy red meat, and besides, in the spiritual sense he has been eating shit his whole life and his sensitivity to the subtler vibrations from which God has created the

otherwise wonderful universe are approaching nil), long-legged, tall, slightly hunched, with graying hair, tousled with gel and slightly back-combed like a North American boy-band singer aged eighteen max, most often sporting a stylish black suit with pleasant white or dark-blue shirts (he's now wearing a black shirt under his black suitcoat, but it doesn't look bad, on the contrary, in Bulgaria there are more than eighty men, born and raised in homes with outhouses who after that have learned how to dress, and the Big-Time Producer is one of them) and with an indescribably smug glance, which, combined with a junkie-ish gleam, an obvious intellect (slightly below average), obviously well-educated (beyond any shadow of a doubt), and purplish-brown dope-fiend bags under his eyes, creates an especially unpleasant general impression. You might like such a person, but most people I know don't. Which doesn't prevent most people I know from kissing his ass when they meet him, because the Big-Time Producer on the whole has a lot of money, and when he's in the mood, he deigns to give some of it to others – not others like him, but mere mortals.

Levski, who was mentioned a bit earlier, for his part was a tall, blue-eyed hero of the nation where the action is taking place – the ideologue of the populace's unsuccessful national liberation movement against the Turks, the founder of a conspiratorial revolutionary network modelled on secret societies, which had set itself the goal of overthrowing Turkish rule, while as a result of several quick betrayals, said revolutionary network was completely liquidated by the Turks several weeks after they learned of its existence. Nothing bad should be said or thought about Levski, especially since during 1873 he was betrayed by his people, caught by the Turks, tried and hung in Sofia. Except that for some reason in the nation which he dreamed of freeing from enslavement it is permissible to write indecent things about Levski on the walls – tens of thousands of his countrymen do it every day with impunity.

Levski really was a true patriot, a hero and the national genius of Bulgaria, but the subsequent use of his image on the part of his mediocre descendants has reduced Levski, a mere hundred years after his demise, to nothing more than a vulgar slogan on the walls of most of the ugliest Bulgarian buildings. In precisely this capacity – as an icon showered by the vulgarities of mediocrity, Levski will be mentioned in this book several more times. While you are reading this, in downtown Sofia, in the place where Levski was hung, a Bulgarian citizen of Roma descent stole yet another (the next to last) bronze griffon from Levski's monument, while another Bulgarian citizen of Bulgarian descent, a policeman, looked on and did nothing, since he was concerned with something more important.

Several years after Vasil Levski was hung, the Russian empire successfully

waged war against the Turks and granted freedom to the populace of the nation in question, which opened for said populace a wide window on Western civilization so that this populace could in the end turn into a group of people who run around like crazy looking for parking spaces, tow away improperly parked cars like crazy and the rest of the time film themselves like crazy in TV soap operas and watch TV soap operas.

“But you see, that way I'm left only with a million, can't you do the math?! With a budget of 1.5 million, if I give half a million to you, I've got to shoot the whole film for a million. About Levski, no less, who is a national icon, for fuck's sake. Are you even Bulgarian at all? No, really, tell me, what kind of Bulgarian are you?”

“I'm a normal Bulgarian, a realist. And you can spare me the patriotic bullshit! Didn't I see your budget breakdown, huh?! A hundred and seventy-five thousand for costumes? Come on! Gimme a break!” We'll describe the Delegated producer from TV8 very briefly as follows – in every sense he resembled the Big-Time Producer (albeit ten years younger) far more than he resembled Vasil Levski.

“In what sense?”

“In the sense that you can blow me – as if I'm a rube and don't know very well that you're gonna barter for those clothes, directly from the importers and makers, like you always do!”

“Shit, are you mental or what? This is a period show! A costume drama! How the hell am I going to barter with clothes makers when my action takes place in the 19th century? What brand do you think makes and sells that kind of clothes now?”

“OK, OK, fine! Don't get so worked up about it, I'll give you a deal. We'll subtract the costumes from my cut. Partially. With 75,000 for costumes you'll still be fine. I want a four-hundred thou commission and that's my final offer, Don't scowl at me like that! Four hundred thou or you can kiss Levski's ass goodbye!”

“Look, the problem is... my problem is that...”

“Your problem is that the more you give to me, the less there is left for you to steal, don't think I don't understand the source of your problems! So let's see here – how much have you put down for screenwriters – 100 bucks a day! Utter shamelessness!”

P



## Diana PETROVA

was born in a small Bulgarian town in 1978. She graduated in English and then enrolled in Sofia University for Book Publishing and Creative Writing.

As a teenager she started submitting short stories for a national literary newspaper for youngsters. Later she worked as an editor of children's magazines, translated and edited books for other publishing houses until she decided to make a general change in her career and start writing.

Her first two books are in the field of children's literature. *The Castle of the Flies* with the marketing title *Wise Fairy Tales* was published by SoftPress Publishing House in 2011 and its total print is sold out.

This book was followed by *Double Planet - Fairy Tales for Adopted and Adopters* in 2012. Diana created a site where she wrote fairy tales for presents, placed by order of clients. Her mature writing period started with the publishing of her novel *Ana* in 2013 from East West Publishing House. Diana is the first author woman in the series for New Bulgarian prose there called *Gravitation*.

This novel was followed by a second one with the title *Synesthesia* and was published by the same house in 2014. *Synesthesia* is one of the first ten titles from 400 manuscripts submitted for the contest for a New Bulgarian novel by

Ciela Publishing House. Part of the novel is translated and published in the international magazine for literature B.O.D.Y with translator Ekaterina Petrova and editor Michael Stein.

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*Synesthesia*, a novel, East West Publishing House, Against Time series, 2014

### **SYNESTHESIA** *Synopsis*

*Synesthesia* is a book about Rad, a young psychologist, and his seven clients with whom he experiences great success before he decides to give up on his career. The Housekeeper, The Programmer, the Jabber, the Perfectionist, the Writer, the Old Man, the Flying Manager – all these share their lives with the young specialist and become close to him.

Throughout the novel, his desperate clients manage to change their lives – not always as expected in people's eyes, but surely surprisingly and for the better. In contrast to their improvement, Rad starts feeling worse and more confused until he crashes with his motor bike and goes into a hospital. It's there at the edge of death that he discovers he is ill from a very rare type of a disease called mirror dactile synesthesia. He had sensed the feelings of his clients thanks to his disease and this was the only reason for his success and hence theirs. Rad dies but his story does not end. After his death his beloved woman receives a strange document that reveals the truth about his condition and how the psychological community he participated in took advantage of it. She decides not to bring the community to trial, but instead to gather his favorite clients and organize them to do something in his memory.

The Flying Manager cooperates and puts effort into the organization. As a result the clients develop a computer game, build a house with wooden art and prepare a book with Rad's story.

At the end of the novel it is not about what they did in memorium or as a consequence of the psychological intervention but how they managed to change their own lives after their acquaintance with Rad. This makes up the point of the story and its finishing line.



## Synesthesia

*Excerpt / Translated by Ekaterina Petrova*

### *Session Three*

The Programmer scowled and kept on his jacket, even though it was warm in the room. I wondered what he would start talking about this time—his issues with making friends or the online gambling program. He sat down in the armchair, but his whole body radiated such tension that one would think he was getting ready to run off at any moment.

“So, today, I’m working on this code for one of our projects . . . and this guy comes in for an interview. At the same time, one of my co-workers announces that some other guy from a different team did such a crappy job with the code that we now have to go through the whole thing again and fix his mess.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Well, so . . . I wanted to show off in front of the guy who was there for the interview. So, I said, ‘Send over the buggy codes to me, I’ll fix them.’ I don’t know why I even gave a damn about the whole thing, since I was probably never going to see that guy again . . . Then they asked him into the conference room and the whole show was over. But I’d already promised to fix the damn code, so I was stuck with it. On top of everything else, just to prove I’d really meant it, I sent out an e-mail to the guy who’d made the code in the first place, with a copy

to everyone else, and attached a file with all his mistakes highlighted in yellow. I just lose my shit sometimes. I still don’t know how I got myself into the whole thing. I had no intention of . . . it’s just that when I saw the guy sitting on the couch, I kind of lost it.”

“He was somebody you didn’t know, is that correct?” I asked.

“Yes, he was a total stranger.”

“And how did he look at you?”

“I don’t know, maybe he was a little suspicious.”

“Does that mean you wanted to prove that he had no reason to look at you with suspicion?”

“Something like that.”

“We might say that your behavior was a sign of a lack of confidence. Did you manage to fix the code?”

“Of course, I think I’m good at my job, but . . .”

“ . . . you lack self-confidence. Perhaps it’s time you told me a little about your family . . .”

“My family, you say . . . What about it—my father’s always right and my mother’s always on his side. Sometimes to me, they seem like a single entity.”

“You don’t seem happy about that.”

“Well, I’m not. There’s something sketchy about the whole thing. She’s his servant.”

“Servant to what?”

“What do you mean ‘to what’? She’s a servant to him!”

“ . . . and perhaps she’s servicing his world.”

“Yes! Well said.”

That’s when I hit a wall. He had a healthy dissatisfaction with his family situation. Therefore, I couldn’t get anything more out of that. Besides, I felt no tension in him. I made a pause.

“I wonder if you could remember something unpleasant you’ve done in the past? It seems like your aggressive behavior, which you probably use in an effort to get approval, the guilt you felt last time, as well as the problems you have with making friends—all that might be connected precisely to something like that.”

This time, I knew immediately I was spot on. I could feel the warm pain as it evaporated from his body through each and every pore of his skin. The more I said in that direction, the more intense the pain got.

“I can’t think of anything,” the Programmer said quickly and fixed his eyes on the floor.

It would be obvious to anyone who ever as much as dabbled in psychotherapy that he was lying.

“Look, you’re not telling me everything.”

We looked at each other for a while. His upper lip quivered ever so slightly. I leaned forward and wrinkled my forehead expectantly.

“Well . . . there is something that nobody knows about. You’re under oath, right?”

Bingo!

“Yes, of course. Nothing from our sessions ever leaves the room, you can be sure of that.”

“I had this friend in the past, a girl. Not a girlfriend, we were just nine or ten. We used to roam the neighborhood together and get into mischief . . .” the Programmer signed.

“Aha,” I raised my voice.

“Well . . . it’s not exactly an easy story to tell. Once, I remember, it was in the early evening, and this maniac got a hold of us. He dragged us into a basement and ordered us to get undressed. He made us stand in a spotlight and started setting up his camera to take pictures of us. As he leaned over, I squeezed through his legs and ran away. I went home and said nothing to my parents. Over the next few days, they looked high and low for my friend. But I stayed silent, because I didn’t want them to think I was a coward.”

The Programmer was now rubbing his hands on his jeans with such speed that one would think he was rubbing a sore spot.

“What happened to the girl?”

“They eventually found her dead body in the basement. They questioned me afterward, since they knew we used to be inseparable, but I denied that we’d been together. I don’t know how they never realized I was lying. Later, I overheard people talking in front of my apartment building, saying she’d been raped and had only died three days later. That pervert had kept her there with no food and no water.” The Programmer’s lips were twisted and he was still not making eye contact. His face was an illustration of a classic case of childhood guilt. It sounded almost a little too perfectly set up.



## Alek POPOV

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

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

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

International rights:  
[www.eulama.com](http://www.eulama.com)



## THE BLACK BOX

### Synopsis

It is 1991, and a black box said to contain the ashes of Professor Emmanuel Banov arrives at the family home in Sofia by post from the USA. Fifteen years later his sons Ned (an SBA, Successful Bulgarian Abroad) and Angel (a wannabe SBA who has won his Green Card in the immigration lottery) are reunited in New York when Angel arrives and moves into Ned's apartment.

Ned works just below the immigrants' glass ceiling on Wall Street, and Angel, after years of trying to make things work in post-Communist Bulgaria, hopes to emulate his brother's success in the heart of capitalism. However, the only job he can get is as a dog-walker.

He falls for the mysterious Diane but comes up against the powerful Dogsters union and its sinister leader Merle. Meanwhile, Ned is sent back to Bulgaria to find out what has happened to the maverick Mr Kurtz, who has holed up in an old steelworks with an army of workers. On his return from Bulgaria Ned becomes embroiled in Angel's battle with Merle for the hand of Diane, which ends in a gruesome showdown that transforms the Banovs' lives in extraordinary ways.

A darkly comic satire, *The Black Box*\* exposes the selfishness, greed and corruption that is found in every society – whether it be in the former Eastern Bloc or the West, a dog-walkers' union or in the canyons of Wall Street, the rarefied air of academe or the Club of Successful Bulgarians.

\*The novel was published in German, Italian, Turkish, Serbian and Polish under the title “Low Flying Dogs”

“Gogol is risen-in Bulgaria! Alek writes satirically about Eastern European misguided hope in salvation from America, while in turn, a box of ashes of a dead father shows up. Wonderful and effortless humor in a highly readable narrative without postmodernist gimmicks. Alek is both entertaining and philosophical – one of my favorite living writers not only in Eastern Europe but in the world these days”.

*Josip Novakovich, finalist for the Man Booker International Prize, 2013*

“A fluid and pointed novel that teaches us the lesson that Communism and capitalism are brothers, like Ned and Angel . . . A marvellous book.” – *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*

“Wonderfully entertaining” – *Nürnberger Zeitung*

“Popov is a great read . . . [*The Black Box*] takes humour, irony and the grotesque to extremes.” – *OE1 (Austrian television)*

“Alek Popov does away with old fairytales. His new novel was at number one for weeks in the bestseller lists in Bulgaria. It is a satire of gold diggers in the West and the East, of the yearning for happiness shared by successful people and underdogs, and of the wrong impressions we immediately form of each other when a world divides us. East or West, top or bottom, dead or alive: let us be brothers! Racy, witty and damned biting. Woof!”

*\Residenz Verlag*

# The Black Box

*Excerpt / Translated by Daniella and Charles Edward Gill de Mayol de Lupe*

“You have hairs in your nose.”

“Excuse me?” I leaned over the table.

“You have hairs in your nose.” He stared at me fixedly.

My brother is a whole six years younger than me but doesn't look much younger. He's smartly dressed and smells of expensive eau-de-Cologne. His hair is slicked back and his ears have somehow mysteriously drawn closer to his skull. Ned's got nothing to do with Nedko the postman; Ned's a guy you can rely on.

“Everyone's got hairs in his nose.”

“But yours are sticking out.”

What a cheeky bastard! Is that all he's got to say to me? After four years. Instinctively I touched my nostrils. I came across a small clump.

“Big deal.”

“If you want to integrate you'd better remove them.”

“Is that the most important thing?”

“It depends. Sometimes first impressions count.”

“Don't you worry,” I poured myself more beer, “I'll manage.”

“Chance is chance. Image is image.”

We are in the Indian restaurant on Columbus Avenue, not far from my brother's den. The street splits the crenelated relief of New York like a runway, disappearing in the violet-stained sky. The sun had vanished ages ago, but the city continues to radiate heat. I had landed exactly six hours ago, three of which had been spent on the plane because of suspicions of an on-board epidemic. But, after carrying out all the tests, they apparently concluded that we weren't such a big threat to the security of the USA and they let us disembark. While waiting, my brother had been hanging around the airport, having a further opportunity to think about the reality of my arrival from all possible angles. As far as I was concerned what had happened was an omen. There was a contagion on board, but the source was not the snotty boy. The virus had nested inside me. Far more dangerous than anthrax or the plague, undetectable with microscopes and chemical reactions: the failure virus.

“So, now that you are already in America, what do you plan to do?”

I hadn't closed my eyes for the whole flight, my body was yearning for sleep, but the time difference was keeping me awake.

“I've got an interview on Tuesday,” I said with a touch of pride.

Before I left, I had gotten in touch with an employment agency that was finding work for people with legal documents. They had arranged several interviews for me.

“What's the job?” My brother got interested.

“Supervisor in some fast-food place.”

“You have to start somewhere,” Nedko— or Ned, as they call him now — pointed out tactfully.

I scooped up some sauce with the end of the naan and took a bite. Then masterfully tipped the rest of my beer into my mouth. My tongue sizzled like a coal.

“You have business experience,” my brother pointed out. “That's appreciated here.”

He was looking at me intently, as though looking for more defects on my face.

“To hell with that experience! I want to turn over a new leaf. Another beer!” I waved to the waiter.

## **The mantra of losers**

Turn over a new page

Start from scratch

Become a new man

Without noticing I had started repeating it.

Ned lives five minutes from Central Park in an old townhouse built from reddish bricks. The apartment for which he blows just over two thousand dollars a month is on the fourth floor. The steep staircase is covered with thick brown carpeting, which has soaked up a huge variety of stains. It occurred to me that if you tumbled down drunk it would probably soften the impact . . . The air con is left on; a pleasant coolness blows over me. The living space comprises an enormous lounge, bedroom and bathroom. Sparsely furnished, functional, seventies' style. Reddish parquet, a rug with big squares, some posters of abstract expressionists. At one end of the lounge there is a lavish wooden breakfast bar scented with bourbon and tobacco.

I'll live here until I find my feet. How long could that take?

My brother popped up from the bathroom, grinning from ear to ear, waving some funny gadget, something between a vibrator and an electric shaver.

“What's that?” I had a bad feeling.

“A gift! A very useful gadget,” he assured me as he removed the cover from the metal tip. “Removes nasal hair. Here you go.”

CONAIR. Supreme nose-hair remover with a unique rotating head.

“What do you think you’re doing with that filthy gadget? You can shove it up yours!”

“Easy, buddy! You’ll get use to it; you might even like it.”

He switched on and lifted it towards my face. The head vibrated, and the blades glinted.

“Sod off.” I stop his hand.

Making a show of it, I poured myself a full glass of Wild Turkey from his reserves and slumped in front of the TV. Started channel-surfing. Came across some show. Two rabid men were getting into it. Between them stood two gorillas, ready to separate them. The presenter observed them with an unhealthy interest, while the public cried, “Jerry, Jerry . . .” The men are brothers. One of them is screwing the other’s girlfriend while he is slaving away at work for ten hours. Why are you doing this to me? I love her! Because I hate you! You think you’re better than me! The bitch’s weeping ’cause she felt neglected. The public: Booooo! Jerry: Aren’t you a bit uncomfortable doing it with his brother of all people? But he has a soul . . .

“He gives them piles of cash, I bet, to turn themselves into monkeys?” I started getting interested.

“Sure he does.” Ned nodded.

“You don’t have a girlfriend somewhere handy around here?”

“Only a brother . . .” Ned’s giggling.

“Hang on,” I look around suspiciously, “you seriously don’t have a girlfriend?”

“No, I don’t have a steady one, is what I mean. At the minute.”

“But you do date women, don’t you?”

“So far . . .” He yawned.

Tomorrow is Monday, and my brother has to fly to Detroit at half past seven. I stayed to stare at the TV for a while, sound down. There is a couple on the stage, husband and wife. The man confesses he has a transvestite lover. “Jerry, Jerry . . .” the public cries. That thing could never happen in my poor tiny country, I said to myself. If you appear on TV and declare in front of the world that you’re bonking your sister under the nose of her boyfriend, people will point at you for the rest of your life. Here you simply disappear. You grab a few thousand and you float back into the total anonymity you came from.

If you’re nobody, it occurs to me, you can do anything.



## Palmi RANCHEV

was born in Sofia, where he has been occupied with various activities: “a boxer, a coach, a coffee-shop and sports hall owner, a newspaper director, a freelance journalist and a more freelance bodyguard, a screen-play writer, he had his TV show...” However, writing has turned out to be his most enduring passion. Affected by the restrictions of the pre-1989 period, Ranchev defines himself as a “writer in a drawer”. His poetic works have been gathered in several collections such as *Manhattan – Almost an Event* (1993), *The Hat of the Wanderer* (1996), *Rag Flag* (1997), *Hotel Room* (1998), *Midnight Man: a Biography* (2002), *A Lover of Lonely Streets and Desolate Houses* (2004), *What a Blue: Visible and Hidden* (2007) and *Sofia’s Berlin Wall* (2012). His works in prose include four novels – *Streets and Avenues* (1998), *Direction Sacramento* (2000), published in Berlin by Dietrich Publishing House, *Anonymous Snipers* (2006) and *Bible’s Graffiti* (2009), as well as five collections of stories – *Difficult Breathing* (1993), *Street Games* (1994), *Sunday Lunch* (1997), *Amateurs and Professionals* (2003), *Some Luck for a Little Bit Later* (2007), printed in Vienna by Wieser Publishing House, and *Boxers and Passers-by* (Janet 45, 2014).

Ranchev’s stories and poetry have been included in Bulgarian and foreign anthologies of contemporary Bulgarian literature. His works have been translated into English, French, Polish, Spanish, Hungarian, Turkish, Serbian, Greek and other languages. Ranchev is among the four winners of the international Bank Austria Literaris Award for literary works from Eastern and Southeastern Europe (2008).



**BOXERS AND PASSERS-BY** (Janet 45, 2014)  
*Short-story collection by Palmi Ranchev*

Boxing. People get in the ring, start mauling each other and the one who can endure more finally wins. This might be the most common idea about this kind of sports. And, like any other common idea, it might be wrong – because boxing is talent, techniques and hard work. We learn this from Palmi Ranchev’s latest short story collection *Boxers and Passers-by* (Janet 45, 2014). Actually it turns out that boxing is like literature – because it demands talent, techniques and hard work, too. These two seemingly incomparable things blend in the author’s personality to give us an extraordinary alloy: manly yet sentimental, unrefined yet gentle, clumsy and dedicated... The characters dance in the ring of life to show us that when a man is a man, it doesn’t matter if he is wearing boxing gloves or not – he will be a man – always. And the passion of Palmi Rachev’s vivid stories hides in their genuine humanism. Read these stories, because they will not only inspire you, they will make you stronger. Stronger humans.

*Mitko Novkov*

## Macdonald

*Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel*

Remember my dad, how he always sat in the kitchen by the window, just like on that afternoon. Drinking red wine.  
 “Are you going to the café?” Mom asked him. “You’re usually gone by now.”

“I’m going,” he replied indifferently, before unexpectedly adding: “Y’all could come along.”

“Y’all” meant mom and me. Dad was working at a café on Graf Ignatiev Street downtown. He ran a towel over the tables and carried in cases of soda and beer. I didn’t see him doing much else. He was usually there in the afternoon and late evening. The rest of the time he sat in the kitchen by the window. Drinking red wine and grumbling about life. He had a BA in engineering, yet here he was forced to hang around in some café.

“What are you waiting for, get dressed!” Dad called.

“So you’ve finally decided to take us out,” mom huffed peevishly. “We haven’t gone out since I don’t know when.”

“To take us out,” he laughed and again lifted his glass. “We’re going to MacDonald.”

That was the best thing that could’ve happened to me at that time. The minute he got a little extra money, dad took us to MacDonald. I always corrected him, telling him there was an “s” on the end. But he stuck to his guns – MacDonald. I didn’t pipe up now, I was that happy. The main attraction was the toy in the Happy Meal box. Mom usually just got a coke, while he sat gawking or reading the free newspaper.

“Just let me take a quick shower and I’ll be ready,” mom said, giving him a quizzical look. “Or should we just leave now?”

“I’m gonna take a shower, too,” I put in after her.

“Let the kid take a shower,” dad agreed and immediately added: “Then afterwards we can go pay the bills. The water and electricity. Good thing we turned off the heat, at least.”

“So should I shower or not?” Mom asked.

“I, for one, am not going to shower. But you decide for yourself.”

Dad usually drank a bottle and a half. Then he would buy two more bottles and again drink a bottle and a half. Now he was drinking from three half-empty bottles. He had lined them up next to the balcony door so they’d be within

reach, and because our refrigerator had long since stopped working.

“I want to wear my green dress,” I announced.

“Are you out of your mind?” Mom, already in her slip, asked indignantly. “A summer dress in November?”

“OK, fine, what do you want me to wear?”

I was afraid that dad would quickly get fed up with our eternal squabbling before going out. It was different when it was just the two of us. Then we could squabble all we wanted. It was even fun sometimes. Mom always wanted me to wear something I didn't want to wear. The opposite was also true: I always wanted to wear something she didn't want me to. Now I was ready to wear even the most abominable outfit, say that woolen dress with the big buttons on the collar, just to go to MacDonald's.

“Are we going to take a cab?” Dad asked as we were standing in front of the elevator.

“Of course we'll take a cab,” I hasten to put in.

“Let's not pretend to be something we're not,” mom said.

“What are you trying to say?” dad asked.

“That'll be another three leva wasted.”

Dad shrugged, in any case the elevator had come. We had an old Soviet Zhiguli with flat tires. It was parked in front of the apartment block. I say this as an addendum to the argument about how we should get there. The two of them didn't pay any attention to the Zhiguli at all. I alone glanced at it. There are people who drive Zhigulis.

“Are you drunk?” Mom asked after a few steps.

“Should I answer that?” Dad said with a laugh. “Or are you just asking?”

“I'm going back home,” she said. “You go on with your daughter if you want.”

I would often warn them: don't fight like little kids. Then they would laugh and stop fighting. They didn't pay any attention to me if they'd already started yelling, though. They would keep at it until they both finally shut up. Sometimes for a whole week. So then, as we were walking to the bus stop, I kept a sharp eye on how things were developing, so I could jump in in time.

Bus No. 11 came almost immediately. But there were so many people waiting at the stop that we were hardly able to get on. Inside it was packed, too. I could hardly breathe. Very aptly, Dad hissed: “God damn it!”

He grabbed on to one of the hanging leather hand straps and let his head loll onto one shoulder. A magnificent blimp of a woman had settled into the seat across from him. She eyed him with suspicion. The two other passengers from the double seat also looked him over. Dad, to my satisfaction, was positively

dangling by his arm, not paying them any attention. Mom found a free seat and called me over. Her face hadn't lost its sulky expression. As if she were not calling me, but continuing to argue with dad. I went over to her. I was sad that dad was standing there, hanging his head. He was alone. And everyone around him was looking at him. Just then he made a barely perceptible move with his shoulders. Or rather with the one shoulder that was hanging down. And then sonorously puked. He had never done that before. He drank red wine every day. But that was the only time he puked.

We hadn't gone to MacDonald's in six months. I can calculate that now. But then it simply seemed like we hadn't been there for an unbearably long time. I didn't even know what toys they had anymore. Things were different when dad had had a steady job. He'd been an engineer. And not some ordinary lackey/manager in some café belonging to his childhood friend. The main thing they sold there, he told me once, was drugs. Dad puked on all three of them. The blimp let out a howl. But he puked again, this time only on her, and she shut up, her arms outstretched.

Dad wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his jacket. He looked somehow winded. I was on the verge of tears. But the bus stopped and dad waved. He headed towards the door without turning around. We got off after him. I was sure the whole bus was watching us. It wasn't such a big deal. Soon we were simply walking down the sidewalk. I wondered whether we would reach MacDonald's, just walking like that. Or were we heading the wrong direction? Then dad started laughing.

“Well, I fixed them,” he said and added: “Yep, I sure fixed them.”

Mom kept huffily silent. She clearly thought he had puked especially because of her, to make her look bad.

“Did you see the look those heifers gave me?”

“What heifers?” I asked.

He didn't answer. He kept laughing, much more quietly now. Soon I relaxed as well. We were going the right way. The route was now familiar. Mom no longer seemed to think dad had puked especially because of her, and took him by the arm.

“The wine in one of those bottles had gone sour.”

“It wasn't just from the wine.”

“What else was it from?” she asked.

“Everything!” dad replied and added: “Absolutely everything.”

R



## Bogdan RUSEV

was born in 1975. He holds an MA in English and American Studies from Sofia University and has specialized at King's College, London. He was the editor-in-chief of several magazines and the creative director of two advertising agencies before he turned to full-time writing and translating modern fiction.

Bogdan Rusev's short stories first appeared in influential Bulgarian press publications in 1999. Since then, they have been published in *Granta* magazine and the volume *Twenty Contemporary Bulgarian Storytellers* and have been collected in two volumes: *Electrochakra* (2001) and *The Singles Collection* (2009).

He is also the author of two books for young readers: the fantasy adventure *12 Stories of Belegast* (2004; a second extended edition in 2009), and the science fiction story *The Endless Road* (2012).

His first novel *Come to Me* was published in 2007 - a story about growing up in the 1990s when an estimated 800,000 young Bulgarians fled the country after the Communist regime collapsed and all those that remained had to say goodbye to people they loved. *Come to Me* will be published in English by Dalkey Archive Press in the U.S.

It was followed by *The House* in 2008 - a detective novel in which the protagonist, a former gossip columnist turned private eye, investigates an attempted murder in the house of a television reality show. *The House* was published in

German as *Koma Prinzessin* in 2015 by Louisoder, Munich. His third novel is *The Tourist*, published in 2010. It is the story of a man who travels around the world to write hotel reviews but this is only a cover for his real job: assisting people who have decided to end their own lives. The character remains nameless throughout and there is no dialogue - all conversations are retold as neutrally as possible to achieve a darkly comical atmosphere of complete alienation. An expanded and revised version of the novel will be published in English as *A Tourist, He Thought* by Austin Macauley Publishers, London.

His latest novel is *The Room*, published in 2014. It is the second volume in the series started by *The House*, featuring the same protagonist. In *The Room*, he investigates the disappearance of a young woman who works in an adult online chatroom. *The Room* will also be published in German by Louisoder, Munich.

Bogdan Rusev's novels are published in Bulgarian by Obsidian (obsidian.bg)

Bogdan Rusev can be reached at bogdan.rusev@gmail.com

### Bibliography

- |                                                                                                                               |                                                                         |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2001 – <i>Elektrochakra</i> (short stories)                                                                                   | 2010 – <i>The Tourist</i> (novel)                                       |
| 2004 – <i>12 Stories of Belegast</i> (stories for young readers)                                                              | 2011 – <i>Three Novelettes</i> (short novels)                           |
| 2005 – <i>A Magic Night</i> (short stories)                                                                                   | 2012 – <i>The Endless Road</i> (illustrated novel for young readers)    |
| 2007 – <i>Come to Me</i> (novel)                                                                                              | 2013 – <i>The Words</i> (short novels)                                  |
| 2008 – <i>The House</i> (novel)                                                                                               | 2014 – <i>The Room</i> (novel)                                          |
| 2009 – <i>The Singles Collection</i> (short stories)                                                                          | 2015 – <i>Koma Prinzessin</i> (German translation of <i>The House</i> ) |
| 2009 – <i>12 Stories + 3 New Stories from the world of Belegast</i> (stories for young readers, revised and extended edition) |                                                                         |

## THE ROOM

### Synopsis

Nikifor Valkov, the protagonist of *The Room* (and the novel preceding it, *The House*), is not a typical private detective. He does not have a gun, he is no good as a hacker and he used to work for a newspaper, not the police. But he knows all the right people and he is willing to go the extra kilometer in pursuit of the truth.

When the ambitious wife of a high-flying politician hires Nicky to persuade a young girl from an adult online chatroom to stop seeing her husband, the job looks simple enough: find the girl, talk to her, pay her a bribe for her silence. But when the girl disappears, things get messy. And Nicky does not like messy.

His search for the missing girl will take him through exclusive private clubs, modern newsrooms, striptease bars, nationalists' headquarters and hackers' dens in the last days of the year 2012 in the Bulgarian capital Sofia. But after he has exhausted all the usual suspects and his only ally in the investigation goes missing as well, Nicky will have to go deeper to find what is going on. He will have to go into The Room...



## The Room

Excerpt / Translated by Bogdan Rusev

I took a taxi to the Greenville Hotel and used the wi-fi in the car to Google Anelia Spasova. She was the executive director of the Care Foundation which dealt in several of the more media-friendly charities: arts scholarships for deaf children, foster families raising guide dogs for the blind, etc. Her photo on the screen of my mobile phone showed a woman who had a very clear plan for her life and did not mind running over any intervening circumstances - but I decided to hold on to my opinions until I met her in person.

Several links down the list of search results, I found Mrs Spasova's husband. His name was Emilian Spasov and he was a relatively conservative, relatively popular member of parliament. Before I could read more about him, the taxi arrived and I got off in the cold desolation which surrounded the Greenville Hotel.

In the quick dusk of the late afternoon, the Greenville Hotel looked like it was built on the set of a Scandinavian crime film production. On the left, I could see the forlorn Ferris wheel of the derelict Sofia Funpark, and on the right rose the massive concrete slab of Tokuda Hospital.

I found the hotel entrance and the guy at reception told me how to go down into the spa centre. I pushed open the heavy glass door and stumbled inside in the warm moist air, heavy with the smell of pachouli and sandalwood.

The spa centre had everything that I figured a spa centre should have: a decorative waterfall, ambient Asian music and a huge pile of fluffy white towels hiding an attractive young woman with perfect skin and eyes that were as blue and distant as a glacier.

The young woman welcomed me to the Greenville Hotel spa centre but after she found out that I was not interested in their Special Weekend Offer (sauna and hot volcano rocks therapy), she pointed me to where Mrs Anelia Spasova was sitting.

Anelia Spasova was sitting in something like a small bar at the far end of the foyer, sipping something green from a tall glass. She was wrapped from head to toe in one of the spa centre's fluffy white towels and wore high-heeled flip-flops. She looked a little older than me, but I could not be certain in the semi-darkness.

"Hello," I said and sat down across from her. "I am Nikifor Valkov."

“Can I get you a drink from the bar?,” she asked. “Tea? Yerba mate?”

“I’m fine,” I said.

We were silent for a moment. Then she said, “Do you know who my husband is?”

“No,” I said.

She told me what I had just read. Emilian Spasov was the vice-chairman of a parliamentary committee, he had been in politics for ten years and before he was elected in this parliament as a member of the current ruling party, he had been in the previous parliament as a member of another party which had been ruling at the time.

“Great,” I said.

Anelia Spasova looked at me sharply.

“May I ask where you stand politically?”

“I vote for ideas, not for parties,” I said.

“Are you serious?”

“No,” I said. “Can we talk about your problem?”

“We are talking about my problem,” she replied coolly. “My most serious problem right now is called Emilian Spasov. We’ve been married for fifteen years. We have four children – the oldest is twelve and the youngest is two. I thought that we were over the phase of marriage where I need to worry about its future. It turns out that I was wrong.”

Anelia Spasova sounded like she had practiced this speech. Perhaps, as the executive director of a charity foundation, she had to talk in front of an audience all the time and she was no longer able to talk any other way. I settled more comfortably in the rattan chair and listened.

“A few weeks ago, I noticed that my husband has started to spend more time in front of his computer at home. I bought him a tablet for last New Year’s Eve and he hardly ever uses the computer in his home office. But now he started to work there again. So I decided to check what he was doing in there.”

“On his personal computer?,” I asked.

She took a sip from the green liquid. It looked as thick as paint and there were visible lumps of something even thicker in it. It was probably 100% organic aloe vera but it looked like something Shrek would serve Princess Fiona for breakfast.

“Are you married?,” Anelia asked me.

“No.”

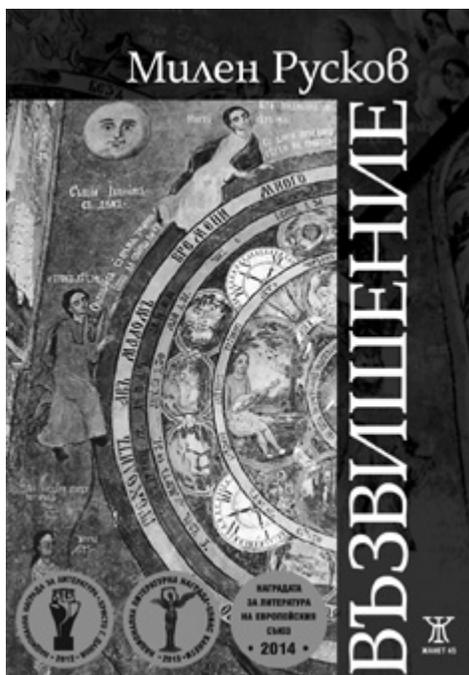


R

## Milen RUSKOV

Bulgarian writer and translator Milen Ruskov, born in 1966, graduated from Sofia University in 1995. He is one of the laureates of the European Union Prize for Literature in 2014 for his award-winning, best-selling and fully-staged novel *Summit* (*Възвишение*, 2011). Ruskov has written three novels: *Pocket Encyclopaedia of Mysteries* (Janet 45, 2004), which was awarded the Bulgarian Prize for Debut, *Thrown into Nature* (Janet 45, 2008), awarded the Bulgarian Novel of the Year Prize, and *Summit* (Janet 45, 2011), which won Golden Century Award of Bulgarian Ministry of Culture, and Hristo G. Danov Award. In 2011, *Thrown Into Nature* was published in the U.S. by Open Letter Books with the support of the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation.

Working as a translator from English, he has translated more than twenty books, including some truly beautiful and important works, such as *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* by Thomas De Quincey, *Novel Notes* and *The Angel and the Author* by Jerome K. Jerome, *Money* by Martin Amis, and *Transformation* by Mary Shelley, among others. In 2009 he won the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation’s Krastan Dyankov Translation Award for his translations of *Money* by Martin Amis and *De Niro’s Game* by Rawi Hage.



## SUMMIT (ВЪЗВИШЕНИЕ)

### Synopsis

In Turkish-ruled Bulgaria, the year is 1872, a feverish period of revolutionary committees, raids on Turkish cash-convoys, brigand freedom fighters and a quest for knowledge and identity, known in history as the Bulgarian Revival. This is a time of passionate self-education and allegiance to the great cause of ridding Bulgaria of its oppressors. The pretentious pomp of revolutionary ideals is filtered through the consciousness of two lads, the earnest semi-educated Gicho and his credulous kleptomaniac companion Assen. They set out armed with guns and books from the town of Kotel to

join a band of brigand-revolutionaries in the mountains. Their characters reflect a mixture of down-to-earth brigand ruthlessness and revolutionary idealism, while their adventures form a rich comic pageant, enlivened by Gicho's well-meaning attempts to educate his companion. Once they have joined the brigand band, they take part in the robbery of a Turkish tax-wagon convoy at the Arabakonak Pass – an event that marks the turning point in their tragicomic adventures. This robbery, notorious in Bulgarian history, provoked an effective and harsh reaction from the usually corruptible Turkish authorities, leading to mass arrests and the crushing of the Internal Revolutionary Organization. Our two characters, encircled in the mountains by the Turkish army, now face a dilemma which puts their personalities to the test. They make different choices, but both meet the same end.

The narrative is conveyed in Gicho's words – a rich, crude Renaissance language which demands to be read out loud. His character combines a modern curiosity about the wider world with traditional peasant instincts. The resulting internal conflict is comic and revelatory in turns. The novel daringly blows away all the patriotic clichés normally associated with this serious subject, without underestimating the desperate heroism of the times.

## Summit

Excerpt / Translated by Christopher Buxton

*Context: The novel is set in 1872. Revolutionary committees have been set up throughout Bulgarian lands to prepare the people for revolution against their Turkish oppressors. It is a time of passionate self-education – known in history as the Bulgarian Revival. Two lads, Gicho and Assen, armed with guns and books, set out from Kotel to join a band of brigand-revolutionaries in the mountains. Their characters reflect a mixture of down to earth ruthlessness and idealism. Their waves of extreme optimism and pessimism speak to an ambivalent contemporary Bulgarian consciousness – resulting from still feeling exiled on the outskirts of Europe.*

Next day in the town of K. we were stopping at an inn to sleep. And there's a Frenchie there, boys. Who can tell what wind has blown him here? The innkeeper makes out he's some kind of engineer. I give the Frenchie the once over – he's a well-made bloke, with proper European clothes, a long coat to his knees, and a tie round his neck, striped gold and black, he's carryin' a bowler hat in his hand, his trousers are pinstriped in silver and grey, his shoes are shining like the sun. Friends! It's real elegance! It's not half fine being a European – I tell you truly. When I'm looking at him, like this, my eyes are hanging out – I say to myself, I'd like to be dressed like him, up to the nines, so I'd come out looking like a human being in front of other human beings, not like some grubby oriental vassal, ruled by Abdul Aziz the Sultan. A-ah, I say to myself, life's not fair.

I learnt – or informed myself as they say in French lingo – that this Frenchie worked for the so-called Austrian Railways, finding out where they could push out the line. I don't know what he does at night, but by day he's going round all the surrounding districts, finding out the lie of the land, for the long-awaited railway line. I have never seen such a thing in my life. And don't even ask about Assen. I'll slap you for asking me stupid questions and wasting my valuable revolutionary time. Don't you have a head on your shoulders? Then use it, man!

And so this Frenchie that I was telling you about, is rooming on the top floor, same as us, on the other side of the corridor. And look how Fate sets things up that after we slept, me and Assen, I go to the yard to drink water and get something from the saddle bag and I see the Frenchie in front of me. He's coming back, and as we pass, he gives me a nod for fellowship and lifts his hat

off his head. After a few steps on, I turn around quick to see where he's going and I see he's going up the stairs and afterwards I hear a door close. So he's gone to his room. Then I have a think and I go and drink water, then I come back up and I listen through the door to see if I can hear anything. There's silence, boy. I can't tell if the bloke's asleep, who knows? When I come back to our room, I say to Assen: "Assen," I say, "go downstairs and harness up Granddaddy Yovan so we're ready for a quick getaway."



S

## Alexander SEKULOV

was born on January 6, 1964, in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. He was a journalist and an editor at *Maritza* and *Novinar* newspapers (1991 – 1997). He had his own daily column, "Under the Yoke," in *Maritza* newspaper from 1993 until 2009. For this column he was awarded with the Plovdiv Prize for journalism in 1995. He was also the Executive Director of European Cultural Month – Plovdiv 1999. Alexander Sekulov is the author of four poetry books: *Seventh Sky* (1988); *High above the Distance* (1997); *Enchanting and Light* (2003); *Maps and Geographies* (2010). He is also the author of several collections of essays: *The Master and the Stones* (1996); a book with fragments *The High Stone Hills* (2006), *History of the Minimum Resistance. A Chronological Novel in One Column* (2008), which is a collection of some of his writings for his column in *Maritza* newspaper. Sekulov collaborated with the artist Atanas Hranov on two art collections: *Nasko H. Stories with Rum, Ginger, Raisins and Honey* (2005) and *The Little Saint and the Black Pepper Men* (2007). Alexander Sekulov's novel *The Collector of Love Sentences* (2007) was among the six finalists for the Vick Foundation Prize. The novel was released in a second edition in 2008. It was translated into Serbian and published by Geopoetiki Publishing House. In May 2009 Alexander Sekulov's second novel *The Little*

*Saint and the Oranges* was published, followed in 2010 by his poetic anthology *Maps and Geographies*.

He is also a playwright, with two original plays – *No Electricity for the Electric Chair* and *Bright Hotel Rooms* – and two stage adaptations of Bulgarian novels.

Alexander Sekulov's works have been translated into English, German, French, Hungarian, Serbian, and Macedonian. Alexander Sekulov is a recipient of the following national literature awards: Tzvetan Zangov (1985, 1986, 1987), Academica (1988), Ivan Nikolov (1998, 2004). His book *Enchanting and Light* won the Plovdiv Prize for literature.

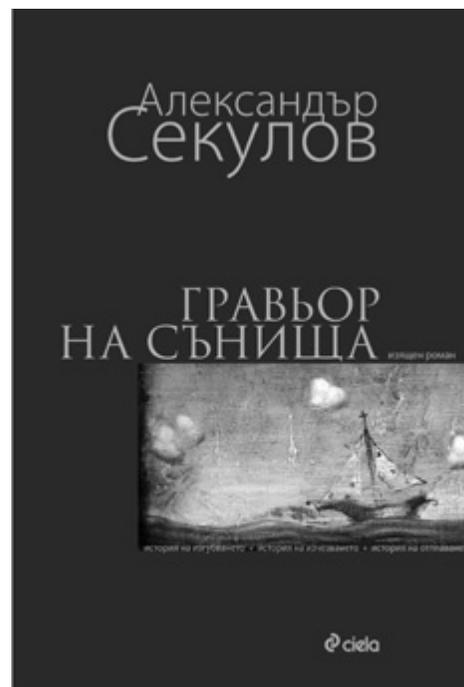
**THE ENGRAVER OF DREAMS** tells the story of separation as happy eternity  
*Synopsis*

*The Engraver of Dreams* is a novel in three parts, published together for the first time – *The Collector of Love Words*, *The Little Saint and the Oranges* and *The Last Company of Captain Cock*. It took Alexander Sekulov seven years to write the book.

Two stories are simultaneously told in the book: the first story is about a woman with many men and the second story is about several men with a woman.

Through the labyrinths of time pass Grace, a former circus actress with rainy eyes and born with a gift to make love sweet with mint, the collectors of Absolutely Necessary Things Mateo Plyushkin and Leopold Pushkin, the master of silver Yosifidius Io., the tall traveling magician Nasko H., his dark shadow Negro Jose, George Horazius, George Zacharias, the gentlemen of robbery Bastian Herze Montolivo and Elver Banyaga, the little saints under the balconies of Valparaiso, the beautiful players with names Danielle Sinserosa and Frank Stanley, the indefatigable explorer of nostalgia Lemuel Cardington Swift, as well as the lovers of black pepper in Captain Cock's company.

All of them are looking for places where love stories are not told to the end; where the truth has a thousand faces and each one could be false and at the same time irresistibly exciting, and being irresistible and exciting, the truth about it has absolutely no significance not only now but ever, until the very end of days, things and stories.



## The Collector of Love Words

Excerpt / Translated by Inna V. O'Brian

Grace Semich paid with the rest of her days in order to compile the collection of tales about the man she had walked away from on a cold morning in Amsterdam. The former circus actress had spent much of her life with daggers flying against her and she knew that the love-struck always searches for his lover looking ahead, but he can never find her in his shadow. That is why she could roam carefree through ports, cities and deserts never leaving a mark of her discrete passion. Years ago she gave the man the one and only gift of attainable eternity – the final good-bye – and he generously scattered in the air the sorrow that came from missing her body. While dreaming of her he wandered lands, streets and winds the world over, but he never let himself forget her, always speaking her name. Now she had to track the routes of his long lonesome expeditions, she had to meet with captains of ships he had sailed across continents, trace his steps in the humid dark green jungles, record carefully the stories of witnesses who were haunted by the tall hunched wizard dressed in an orange shirt with eyes filled with happy despair. She had to give him a name.

They met on the verge of two moments in time. She saw the last silver dagger of her youth fly toward her face and the fear of surviving sent a chill

down her spine. He was passing through the final steep slope before taking a stop on the stone hill of his invulnerability. Not much time passed by between the late tea of their encounter in Amsterdam and the long morning wind of their good-bye. To be precise they were together for 2 days, 17 hours, 43 minutes and the fleeting seconds, in which only two lives perish and a few thousand ordinary deaths take their toll. The time they spent together was enough for Grace Semich to accept that she could not offer a home to this man's soul. Commitment was lethal to him - it made the atoms of his body burst, it dried up his voice, it bleached the pupils of his eyes. He could die a final unbearable impudent death by commitment. Like a dandelion, he wanted to scatter himself around the world into myriad silver names.

On their last night together she woke up with the feeling that a tall black guy gently deposited in her heart one small death. She then got up from their happy bed and walked around the pale dusk in the room of the Rembrandt Square Hotel. In her leather bag she collected all her perfumes, body lotions, brushes and combs and took one last look at the sleeping body of the man who she knew she could only love in his future. She bent over him and with one slight breath blew his fate into pieces.

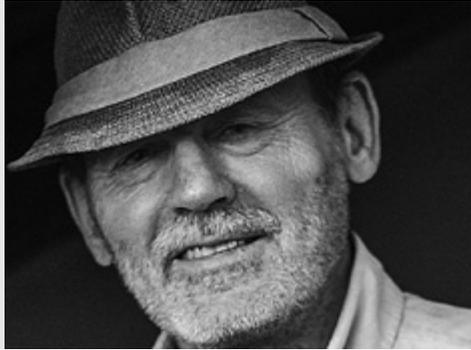
For years on end she could hear his sorrow call for her from the jungles of the Amazon, amidst the desert winds, in the ear of a woman passing by. He would call for her in fear, passion or pain; he would call for her until his voice turned into steam, a cloud, rain and snow so that it can cover the oncoming streets, the tumbling streets of the moments spent without each other. Time sheltered them in its mercy: she was always a few years behind him, but alive, and he was a few moments ahead of her, also alive.

She was in a hospital in Ontario when she first heard a tale about the traveling man. Over by the other bed a tall black woman with hypnotic eyes and purple hair was telling the story to her little boy. In that story an illusionist disappeared in his empty sleeves, lovers uncovered an antique etching and the missing woman was the only one to survive at the end of it. "That is me," Grace Semich thought to herself before drifting to sleep. The next day the black woman shared with her that this was just a small part of the collection of 28 stories about the appearances and disappearances of one man throughout the world. She had personally read two of them in a book written on thin apple skin, an item that her father guarded jealously; there were rumors about other stories. "No one has ever seen all the stories in one place," she said pensively. Grace felt that the time she allowed herself to not think about the tall hunched man from Amsterdam was over.

Over the next few years she patiently put together all available facts about the whereabouts of the different parts of the collection. She carefully mapped out the complicated routes of the man, his sudden appearances and expected disappearances, the purple-green stays at the house atop the hill. She found out the names of all other women he had fallen in love with, she even found out the names of the two he could have loved, had he not closed his eyes while falling into apple trees. Her desk was covered with leads to islands and tribes that only he knew of; she was pedantic when researching the hidden labyrinths that he had strolled casually outside ordinary time, as he had made sure not to leave a trace on their walls. Filling in gaps in dictionaries, she coined much needed words to describe journeys in which one did not need to discover anything. At times she felt that she could almost reach for him, as if she were following him down a narrow path and virtually smelling the scent of his skin, the skin on his right shoulder that glistened like the sliver of the moon in the morning of their good bye in Amsterdam. She was certain that emptiness was the only gift a woman in love could give to a man, yet in moments like that her confidence was feeble and the smell of disaster flooded her nostrils. Some nights his silhouette melted in the distance, the information on him became extremely confusing, as though he had never been. Often she had to rule out erroneous data, unlikely rumors; she had to compare the names of the ports to the ships, examine endless passenger lists name by name. That is precisely how she discovered the name of the wife of the prison warden. There was a picture on which the man was coming out of his cabin at the port in Brandeis. On the left, just under the plate with the number for the adjacent cabin, one could identify a woman with an aquiline nose and reddish hair. In her eyes it was easy to read that she had resigned to her sudden falling in love. It took Grace Semich one and a half year to find out the place where this woman lived so that she can buy from her the tale about the complacent yellow cat.

When she found out that the man had gotten off on the Island of Love Stories with just a silver key in his pocket and his traces disappeared thereafter, she knew it was time to pack and go in order to collect the various parts of the collection that had been scattered all over the world. She informed her husband about her long absence that she was giving him as a gift; she filled a notebook with soup recipes for her daughter in London and to her son, who lived in Brittany, she sent a wooden trunk with multiple dividers made at the turn of the century. Then she headed for the Mekong River Delta - the farthest point where she could find some early parts of the collection.

S



## Nedyalko SLAVOV

was born on December 12, 1952 in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. He studied Bulgarian Philology at Plovdiv University Paisii Hilendarski and Cultural Studies at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. He has worked as a publisher in the past and has been a freelancer since 2000. He is the author of the novel *432 Hz*.

Nedyalko Slavov is the winner of the Bulgarian National Award for Literature Hristo G. Danov for the novel *Faustino* in 2011 and the Ivan Nikolov National Poetry Award for *Marble Years*, 2006. His plays *Alaska* and *Exchange of Corpses* have been performed on stage.

His works have been translated into German, English, Russian, Hungarian and Greek.

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*Faustino*, novel, 2011

*Vertigo*, a novel, 2012

*Portrait of the Poet as a Young Man*, novel, 2013

*432 Hz*, a novel, 2015



### **432 HZ**

*A short review*

The plot of the novel *432 Hz* was inspired by the mysticism of the Decree of the Propaganda Minister in Nazi Germany, Joseph Goebbels. Following his order in 1939 the tone of A is set to 440 instead of 432 hertz. Then the scene shifts to nowadays. In only one night and a few hours, the protagonist, a young and talented musician, composes an immortal work. From this moment on, the battle between good and evil begins.

## 432 Hertz

Excerpt / Translated by Valentina Rasheva

His hands flew over the keyboard. He paused for just a moment, picked up the glass from the floor, had a sip, kicked the pedals and rushed on. The chandelier was reflected in his bolding crown, giving out a bony-coloured glow. Ruffled, his sideburns reminded of Pushkin's.

In his usual "senile serenity" (as Dr Peter would have said in English), Mr Farouk was tapping to the beat.

Like a homeless man on a park bench, the red-haired cat named Garfield was dozing on the ottoman.

Mr George suddenly became exalted: he leaped from his chair and the soles of his shoes screeched on the parquet. Garfield got startled and slid off the ottoman.

"But what is music?" the man shouted. "Ladies and gentlemen, do you want to extinguish the music?"

Silence.

"Do you want twilight?"

Silence, again.

"Darkness?"

Mr Farouk rushed like the wind and turned the chandelier off.

"You idiot!", roared Doctor Peter in the dark. "Turn it back on right now!"

Mr Farouk made clapping sounds as he was feeling his way on the wall; he found the switch and lit the chandelier.

It took Mr George a moment or two to recover.

"I did not understand! Yes or no?"

A puzzled murmur rose from the audience. Someone said "Ouch!"

Dr Peter raised his glass and said: "Go ahead, you executioner - extinguish it!"

The man turned around on his heels and sat down. This time the sound of his soles was chilling - Garfield went berserk and flew out into the vestibule.

"Well!" Mr George held out his hands. "Then let us start with Beethoven! First we shall funk it up a bit... or go directly to rapping it?"

Without waiting for a response, he started playing the Moonlight Sonata. He gradually accelerated the tempo and his fingers kept keying a savage repetition. The piano rocked with the wild clusters. His hands flew up and remained

suspended in the air: "Or shall we perhaps do it with Vivaldi, *Summer*, for example" - this was followed by several notes that collapsed in a jazz improvisation. "Mrs Elsa," laughed Mr George, "give this Vivaldi a shot of your vibrato, why the hell not! I think you can do it really well, of course you will, you have the voice, and the sense of swing, too! Come on, please!"

"Oh, what is it you're saying, maestro," Mrs Elsa sobbed, "look at what you have done, now."

A pause ensued. Mr George sat with his hands pressed to his hips. He looked as if he was about to jump in deep water. He cranked his neck, moved his shoulders, cracked his knuckles - the sound of popping cartilage was heard - and then straightened in his chair.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he cried. "It's all here, in this white key! Here is the centre of universal harmony!" Then he bent over the piano.

"La!" This divine Verdi's 'La!' his hand slid a quick glissando. "The very centre of the entire universe. You're heading to Hell - so you record the bemolle, you're heading to Heaven - you record a diesis!"

The man turned around with a grim look on his face. The group shuddered. Parquet patter was heard, as if coming from a herd of animals.

"Mrs Elsa?"

"Yes, maestro?"

The man paused and then said softly.

"What do you think of this theory?"

"Which one, Maestro?"

Mr George had a sip and then, glass in hand, pointed to Ned.

"Sir, tell them the truth! Please!"

Ned was flabbergasted.

"Come on, dear colleague, please!"

Ned blushed and said:

"I can't understand you."

But Mr George didn't hear him; he pulled the chair and began playing the Moonlight Sonata again. With the first chords he started speaking in recitative: "So, my friends, the human brain is a quantum computer," he turned his head and looked around, "and consciousness is the software program set up by the Universe! No objections, right? You can read this on Google," and he continued to play. "And the soul, the soul, my dears, what is the soul?" - another walk up and down the keys - "the soul is information at the quantum level, this can also be found in the search engine," he turned back again looking for someone's

eyes, “and now you are going to ask me what music is.” Mr George swiveled his chair and sat like that, with his back to everyone. Then he slowly said: “This you will not find anywhere, this is what I say to you! Music, my dears, is the most delicate carriage that, up there in the Milky Way, carries our souls through time and space ...!”

Still with his back to the rest, he began striking the keys with one finger - with each movement, he pronounced the name of the note:

“Do - Dominus - God”

“Re - Rerum - Matter”

“Mi - Miraculum - Miracle”

“Fa - Familias Planetarium - the Seven Planets or Solar System”

“Sol - Solis - Sun”

“La - Lactea Via - Milky Way”

“La - the carriage into the Milky Way!”

Then suddenly he was transformed! A wild shudder rippled his body, like an impatient stallion's. He hung over the piano, his fingers slightly crooked, and then crashed hard on the keys. Several tones erupted in unbearable dissonance. Then another pause, and again his hands rose dramatically to the ceiling.

“But what did they do... don't you know?” and he pounded furiously on just one key. “They murdered Verdi's ‘La!’” They drove it insane, from 432 to 440 Hz.\* And why?” Mr George stood and, broken inside, looked around the others present, “So the crowds could march and bring Reason down and slay the Soul! That is what they did! But it will not happen! Nevermore! Remember what Pierre Bezukhov said on the night before they took him out to shoot him? *‘They hold me captive. Me? My immortal soul? Ha-ha-ha! You losers!’*”

Stony silence. One minute, then another five. The clock in the vestibule sounded like thunder. The little door opened with a crash, out came the spring catapult: the cuckoo popped out and counted ten mechanical cuckoo cries.

Another two hours until midnight.

Madame Ruth shuffled the toes of her shoes together, Bedrov chewed his lips. Dr Peter still hung onto his glass with a mighty grip.

Who could bring them out of this silence?

Who would dare?



## Julia SPIRIDONOVA

was born on October 30, 1972, in Sofia into a family of artists.

She was first acknowledged as a writer in 1995 when her first short story “The Pacifier” won the annual UNESCO award. Her story was then included in English and French short story anthologies. In 1996 Julia Spiridonova was invited to take part in the screenplay jury of the Student Film Festival in Munich. In 2006 her first novel *My Sweet Path-walker* won the biggest ever annual children book manuscript competition, held by the Bulgarian Writers Association. In 2007 she was invited by the Russian Presidency as a guest of honour to the International Bookfair BibliObraz in Moscow to represent Bulgaria. In 2008 Julia's children tale, *The Scabby Frog*, illustrated by the internationally acclaimed artist and illustrator Ivan Gantshev, was presented to very positive acclaim at the International Bookfair in Hague. In 2010 the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science gave Julia Spiridonova the Special Merit Award in recognition of her distinctive support in the development of the spiritual culture of younger generations. In 2011, research carried out by the *I Read* website in 27 public libraries in Bulgaria showed that Julia Spiridonova's books are the most often asked for and borrowed books in the country.

Julia Spiridonova is also well-known for her screenwriter work, authoring more than 400 scripts for the Bulgarian National Television. She is the creator and author of several children's and teenagers' TV shows and series. She is a member of the Association of Bulgarian Writers.

### B o o k s

*The Goo Goo Birdies* (1999), *Goo Goo Birdie Stories* (2000), *Adventures with Djigo* (2003), *Me, Tina* (2008), *A Private Eye's Adventures in the Underworld* (2009), *My Sweet Pathwalker* (2009), *Countess Bathory* (2010), *Blood of Kings* (2011), *Max* (2012), *The Labakn's Needle* (2013), *A Tale of the Magic Flute* (2013), *Be My Friend* (2015).

### A w a r d s a n d N o m i n a - t i o n s

1995 – The annual UNESCO award for the short story “The Pacifier”

2005 – 3rd prize winner in the competition Europe in Fairytale

2006 – The children book manuscript competition, held by the Bulgarian Writers Association for the *My Sweet Pathwalker* novel

2010 – The annual Konstantin Konstantinov award, winner, Author of the Year category

2010 – The annual P.R. Slaveykov award – Contribution to the Bulgarian Literature award, winner

2012 – The annual The Golden Apple award, nominee

2012 – The Child, honorary diploma for lifetime contribution to the happy childhood of Bulgarian children

Julia Spiridonova was nominated three times for the national Hristo G. Danov award (Book of the Year category) in the years 2010, 2011 and 2015.

### C h a r i t y

From 2009 – to present – founder and organizer of the weekly *Who Loves Fairytales* initiative at the Children and Youth Department of the Sofia Capital Library

From 2010 – to present – founder and organizer of the *Where Children Live, There Should Be Children Books* campaign. The campaign aims to set up libraries of newly published books for orphanages.



Illustrator: Penko Gelev

### BE MY FRIEND

#### Synopsis

*Be My Friend* narrates the adventures of a little toad. He is rejected by the other frogs in the swamp because he is different. But toads need kindness, love and friendship as everybody else. The little toad leaves the swamp he has lived in all his life to seek a friend who will need him. Throughout his adventures, he meets the beautiful samodiva<sup>1</sup>, whose dance is bewitching, the greedy goblin with his magical treasure, the lamya<sup>2</sup>, the zmey<sup>3</sup>, the good and noble stopan<sup>4</sup>, the old witch with an ugly nose. He meets all these fairytale creatures to find out that neither beauty, nor treasures and power, not even kindness can replace the very need of every single being to love and be loved.

<sup>1</sup> Samodiva – a woodland fairy found in Bulgarian folklore and mythology.

<sup>2</sup> In Bulgarian folklore, *lamya* is a female creature with three or nine heads, similar to a dragon.

<sup>3</sup> In Bulgarian mythology, the word *zmey* is used to describe a dragon.

<sup>4</sup> In Bulgarian mythology, *stopan* is a benevolent ghost who acts as a protector of a household, village, spring etc.

# Be My Friend

*Excerpt / Translated by Christopher Buxton*

*“Don’t walk behind me; I may not lead. Don’t walk in front of me; I may not follow. Just walk beside me and be my friend.”*

*Albert Camus*

Who knows why, but folk don’t like bogs at all, but for us frogs, they are the most beautiful places in the world. In the bog, there are so many hiding places! You can squeeze in among the tall reed-stalks, you can snuggle down deep into the soft mud or you can curl up in the snow white lily cups. We frogs love playing hide-and-seek, more than anything else. We stop a little, just enough to annoy a cocky swan or a smug wild duck, and then carry on playing - right to the end of the day.

And at night? At night the wind whistles through the reed-bed harp, we sing in a choir, and the bog fires dance crazily till the morning.

Yes, the bog is frog heaven, but sometimes even heaven can turn out to be an unfriendly place. I remember one story. It was told to me by an old, really ancient frog, when I was still a tadpole.

Once a long, long time ago...Or maybe not that long ago, who knows, there was a little frog, who felt sad in his home-bog.

One day some little frogs noticed that they were all smooth and green, just one was...hmm. Pretty pimply.

“What’s up with that little frog?”

“He’s a bush frog,” replied the grown up frogs.

“Ugh, bush frog! We don’t want to play with him,” croaked the little ones.

The bush frog looked at himself in the water. Oh dear, oh dear, he was so ugly! Instead of being smooth and shiny, he was all over lumps and swellings. He burst into tears: “Oh, oh,oh, I want to be smooth,”

“But you’re not,” squawked the little frogs.

“Who will play with me?”

“No-one.”

The poor little frog couldn’t complain to its Daddy or Mummy, because frogs haven’t got parents like children do. Every frog lets loose a thousand eggs into the water, they get mixed up and you can’t tell which egg belongs to whom.

The bush frog was everyone’s child and that’s the same as saying he was nobody’s.

“All right! If no-one wants me, I’ll go away.”

The little frog jumped on to a water lily leaf, then to a second, then to a third and ended up on solid ground.

“I’ll find myself new friends!” he spoke out loud, to chase the fear from his froggy little heart.

The little frog got as far as the woods, but jumping was difficult there, because there were lots of fallen leaves, stones and bushes. The little frog quickly became exhausted.

The Day had also got tired and so had gone off to sleep. The Night let down her black hair and darkness fell over the world. Only golden hairpins twinkled in the dark – folk called them stars.

The little frog settled in a meadow and was just about getting ready to cry, when he saw the most beautiful girl in the world – with golden hair, black eyes, white face and white dress.

“Who are you?” the little frog blinked.

“I’m a veela,” the girl’s voice rang like a bell.

“And you’ve got yourself lost in the forest at night?”

“Nonsense! I am here to dance. Veelas only dance at night.”

“And why aren’t you dancing right now?”

“Because it’s impossible without music,” the veela retorted. “I’m waiting for the crickets to come.”

The little frog waited too, because he really wanted to see the veela dance.

“Where are those naughty insects?” she lost her temper.

“I can sing, too,” whispered the little frog.

“You?!”

“I may only be a bush frog, but I’m still a frog,” he blushed.

“Very well then,” the veela waved her hand, “Sing!”

The little bush frog sang – well, not quite like the crickets, but strong and true even so. The veela jumped up as light as a butterfly and moon beams twined in her hair. Yes you’d never see anything so beautiful in the bog, thought the little frog.

The veela danced and he sang and sang, until he was utterly worn out and stopped.

“Sing!” ordered the veela.

“I can’t anymore,” the little frog could barely speak. “I haven’t got the strength.”



# Albena STAMBOLOVA

## Professional Experience:

From 2006: Editor of the rubric for contemporary Bulgarian literature, "altera"- magazine for gender, language, and culture;

2001-2003: Part-time professor at the Department of Literary Theory, Sofia University "St Kliment Ohridski"; courses: Narrative in Literature and Psychoanalysis: Contemporary Critical Approaches, Oeuvre and Context.

1997-1999: Professor in Social Psychology, University of Paris III Sancier, Paris;

1996-1999: Researcher in the Institute for Educational Engineering, University of Paris X Daufine, Paris;

1994-1996: Evaluation of Competence Centre, Noisielles, Paris;

1991-1993: Center for Social Adaptation, Arpege, Paris;

1989-1990: Part-time professor at the French Department, Sofia University "St Kliment Ohridski";

1981-1990: Editor of the French section of the publishing house "Narodna Kultura"

Author of numerous articles, critical reviews, essays, short stories, etc. in the literary weekly "ABV", literary weekly "Literaturen vestnik", cultural weekly "Kultura", "altera" – magazine for gender, language, and culture, political papers "Demokracia", "XXI vek", "Glasove", Dnevnik, Trud, etc.

Her short-stories are translated in French, Polish, Czech, Serbian, etc.

## Bibliography

- 1985: *Mnogotochia (Three Dots)* – a collection of short stories (Svobodno Poetichesko Obshtestvo, Sofia, 1985); nomination 2003 for the Price Helikon, edited in Poland, Pogranice 2014 .
- 2002: *Tova e kakto stava (This is How It Happens)* – a novel (Stigmati, Sofia, 2002); nomination 2002 for the Nacional Price "Hr. D. Danov", edited in USA by Open Letter in 2014 .
- 2003: *Hop-hop zvezdite (Hop-hop the stars)* – a novel (Sema-RS, Sofia, 2003), nomination 2003 for the Price Helikon, edited in Poland, Pogranice 2014 .
- 2004: *Malaise in Death (Boleduvane v smurttta)* – a psychoanalytical critical study (Kritika, Sofia, 2004).
- 2008: *Adventure in Time (Avantura za da mine vremeto)* – a novel (Obsidian, Sofia, 2008), nomination 2008 for Helikon.

## EVERYTHING HAPPENS AS IT DOES

### Synopsis

Boris, a young boy painfully uncomfortable around people, feels at ease with bees. The apian approach to life, admirable in its single-mindedness, makes human existence appear imperfect and burdensome. He falls in love with a girl who wears a pleated skirt. He never speaks to her but he feels her presence as a spatial relationship his body cannot avoid. She disappears one moonlit evening magically climbing the wall of a house. In the meantime, Philip, a 27-year-old pathologist meets Maria, a woman whose eyes, we are told, are like fog. Philip proposes to Maria as if driven by some mysterious compulsion. They marry and have children, the twins Valentin and Margarita. ... And the story continues, accumulating archetypal events and relationships, until, one Christmas Eve, the fates of all its seven protagonists become tied in one existential knot. Unlike more traditional narratives, the novel does not provide the reader with the pleasures of a classical denouement. No character reaches a higher moral ground, no relationship is resolved, no mystery is solved. Rather, as with many a musical composition, the reader is led through a high-spirited climax, a detailed love-making scene in a chapter appropriately called "Erotica," and a tragic one, the death of the mother, Maria, whose evasive yet intense presence in the book has formed its center of gravity. For a Christmas tale, which the novel is in so many ways, the lesson is not obvious, and if any, it concerns mostly the impossibility of making the deep as immediately accessible as the shallow.



## Everything Happens As It Does

*Excerpt / Translated by Olga Nikolova*

### 18. Girls and Mirrors

No matter what she put on, the mirror reflected back an unfamiliar image. In the beginning this seemed normal. One put on clothes in order to become someone else. Changing clothes changed everything.

But there was also what she could observe in other people. For example, her mother. For a very long time she believed that Maria always wore the same clothes. Her mother was her mother and that was it. When she began to notice that Maria's clothes were similar, yet different from one day to the next, she went to the bedroom and opened the wardrobe. It was filled with darkness—all clothes were dark-colored, most of them black, and all of them shapeless, masses of fabric with an occasional seam. Margarita took them down and threw them on the floor, where they landed with a whisper. They were so light—so different from the heavy sweaters, coats and trousers others wore. Margarita sat down on the floor and buried her hands in the fabric. Her mother's clothes responded with a life-like shiver. She lay down and buried her face in them—no smell. Unlike everything else, animate or inanimate, Maria had no smell. The

clothes were tender, caressing, but they smelled of nothing. Or maybe nothing smelled like Maria.

Then Margarita tried to put something on; she didn't know exactly what it was. A piece of clothing. She struggled for a while with the dark violet folds. Just when she thought she could glide her arms or her head in it, she realized there was no hole but only new layers of fabric unfolding in different directions. She persisted, slid her legs and arms blunderingly, without being able to put the thing on. Maria's clothes also persisted, slipping off of her body to the ground. Margarita crumpled them furiously, grabbing them with both hands and pouring them over herself like water. They rolled down like streams, spreading when they reached the flat floor.

Suddenly Margarita stopped and looked down. She was standing ankles-deep in a moving, rippling mass. She lifted one foot, then the other – the fabric filled the empty space as soon as it appeared, then it settled back into stillness. Margarita sat down again and started crying, she was not strong enough to fight the clothes. And she couldn't put them back where they came from, either. She sat in the middle of the lake of fabric, her tears trickling down her cheeks and over the clothes. Gradually, she quieted down as something interesting began to draw her attention. The fabric did not absorb her tears; the water drops from her eyes rolled over and disappeared into the folds like translucent pearls. Margarita tried to catch them but they vanished too quickly, without leaving a trace. Then the tears stopped, and Margarita stayed on the floor, gazing absently. Her mother found her still sitting there. She lifted her up without a word and took her out of the room.

Then there was a period when Margarita refused to change her clothes. She would feel great anxiety whenever Maria tried to force her. Her mother let her be. It was painful, Valentin remonstrated, it was unacceptable, but, as with everything in which Maria was involved, the problem reached its own resolution. Margarita stopped paying attention to clothes, she somehow forgot about them. She would put on and take off her clothes again. End of story.

But then something else happened. Margarita saw herself for the first time. Until then she had only felt herself from within, she had learned a thing or two, but somehow one-sidedly, as if under an umbrella hiding half the world from sight.

She began to make up her face, or more precisely, to paint her face. Her face was like a clean porcelain bowl and invited all kinds of painting. She usually stopped after doing one eye. And that's how she went about for a long time –

with an eye that was her own, and an eye that wasn't.

Maria was never bothered, Valentin was not happy. What now, his sister was a Cyclops. His sister was a clown. On top of that, she did it well. And sometimes snuck out of the house with only one eye painted like this.

One day it was he who stopped her in the middle of putting on her make-up. He had come to pick her up to visit some friends. She was just finishing one eye. When he dragged her to the taxi, he couldn't say if she had managed to finish with it or if he had interrupted her. Her eye was made-up perfectly, even Valentin couldn't deny it.

Margarita entered their friends' house without the slightest embarrassment. He was walking close by her side and everyone began to turn around. Then a mirror made him stop short in his stride. He and Margarita. He and his sister. The two of them together.

Half of her face was identical to his. As if she had merely borrowed it. For the time being. The other half . . . the other half was something Valentin felt unable to describe. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Names of stones dashed through his mind—turquoise, sapphire, ruby, gold, malachite, onyx. What else? Nothing. It was something alive looking at him in the mirror. It was like an ephemerally divine gift for infidels. For the wretched. A gift to make them pause, stunned for a second. A handful of time.

A handful of precious stones. Valentin stared at the other face of his sister. The one that was not his own.

Other faces crowded around them. Other voices gathered, saying pleasant things. The din was becoming denser and denser.

The two remained frozen.

Until Margarita pulled herself away and ran out.



## Lyudmil STANEV

(born 1959) is a Bulgarian writer, publicist, writer, and doctor of medicine by education. For twelve years now he has been producer and presenter of his own radio program about literature. His works include over 500 texts as a columnist for the newspapers as well as:

Scripts: *Clinics on the Third Floor* (TV series), *Little Night Tale* (a full-length movie), *How Can We Catch up with Them Americans* (weekly TV talk-show), *Cock-and-Bull Stories* (TV program for children) and co-script writer for *The Street* (TV show);

Plays: *What a Wonderful World*, *A Winter Night's Dream*, *The Playing Man*, *The Princess and the Pea*, *Little Bag Tale*; *Little Night Tale*, *4000 Words*, *Shakespeare for Students*;

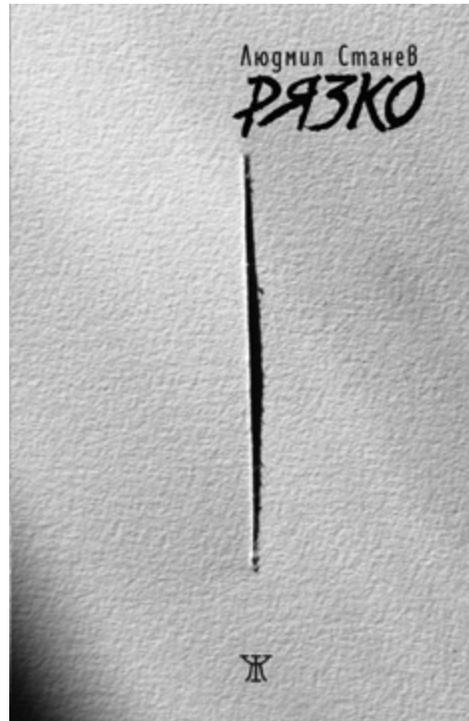
Books: *There Is No Such Book*, *The Unpleasant Tatar*, *Invulnerable*, *Little Night Tale* (Hristo G. Danov National Prize for Children's Literature, 2004), *Less* and his latest collection of short stories *Sharp* (Janet 45 Publishing, 2014).

Lyudmil Stanev's texts have been translated and published in German, French and English.

## SHARP

(Janet 45 Publishing, 2014)  
Short-story collection by Lyudmil Stanev

The book includes 48 short stories  
– from purely absurd ironical and  
sarcastic texts to lyrical stories.



For a whole generation Lyudmil Stanev's coming onto the literary stage has already become history. And I envy this new generation that will discover him after the launch of his new book. I'm sure that with each of his new texts they will experience what we experienced. And it is joy. The joy of reading his texts – intelligently and freely written, with Aristophanes' model high humor, funny like the Marx Brothers, Monty Python and Woody Allen, all of them combined. This is the joy of feeling the real gaming possibilities of the Bulgarian language which had never before Lyudmil Stanev's texts experienced its dadaistic, surreal and vanguard potential.

*Mladen Vlashki*

## A Small Nighttime Tale

*Translated by Professor Filipov*

Once upon a time there was a man who lived in a nice little town.  
He was not young, nor was he very old,  
He went work both on days warm and cold.  
People liked him because he was unselfish and kind,  
and if he was accidentally hurt he said he didn't mind.  
Back after work he always helped his wife.  
For the family he was ready to even sacrifice his life.  
That is how things went for quite some time,  
Until one day to his greatest surprise,  
He discovered that his baby boy, who had a snub nose and wide-open eyes  
was no longer a small baby, because now he could say  
«I want to poo and I want to wee wee.»  
Yes, Misho, for that was the name of the boy, said so and his father's heart  
was filled with joy.  
Now the man knew why his son with the lovely eyes  
tottered all day long asking all the time his “why,”  
Why do all cats meow and why do all dogs bark? What do cats and dogs do  
when it gets dark?  
Why does the clock keep ticking all the time, and who teaches monkeys  
how to climb?  
Why are all the planes in the sky there so small, and why are all poplar trees  
so tall?  
Is there a man hidden in the radio box?  
Why do we all have to wear socks?  
Who is the man who winds up the big trains?  
Where do the birds hide when it begins to rain?  
He asked his questions because he wanted to know,  
His father knew that it was what helped all the children grow.  
But Misho's Dad was busy, he had many things to do,  
Sometimes he was moody and very tired, too,  
And then if Misho went to him with his endless „whys».  
Dad sent his dear boy with wide-open curious eyes,  
To his Mum who sent him to grandma or back to Dad,

And this made our little hero confused, puzzled and sad.  
And then one day the man discovered to his great surprise  
That instead of curiosity there was sadness in his little son's eyes.  
He realized that Misho needed attention and greater care,  
They owed it to the dear boy who was their son and only heir.

One evening he went and sat by the side of Misho's cot  
Confident that he could speak to him and tell him a lot.

But he didn't know what to say so he tried to recall,  
What he felt and what his Mum and Dad did when he was small,

Thinking about it and looking at his child whose big eyes smiled  
He slowly returned to the time when he himself was a child.

#### A SMALL NIGHTTIME TALE

The clock is ticking quietly and every tick  
Takes a bit off the darkness and makes it shorter.

To the child the clock's two glittering hands  
Are two splendid horses drawing a coach.  
They carry the night to the top of the hill,  
And once they get there it begins to dawn.  
The small and big horses are harnessed together  
And they gallop together throughout the whole year.  
The name of the small horse is Tick,  
But its strength is certainly big.  
"Dad, let me tell what the name  
Of the big one is. I know it is called Tock."  
They gallop together through winter and summer,  
Their hooves ringing merrily their "tick-tock, tick-tock."  
The two horses gallop carrying in their coach  
Three brothers; the small Second, and the bigger ones Minute and Hour  
They gallop always together and always in union,  
And everything in their movement is strict and precise.  
Whenever they enter the bedroom of children.

They step very quietly not to disturb their sleep.  
But one night as they pulled their coach,  
Something very wrong happened:  
Suddenly the big horse cried, "Here I stop!  
This gallop is running me down."  
"You are small and slow and you do nothing.  
I do the running and you just plod along!"  
The smaller horse shook its mane in disgust, "If that's how you feel I'll also  
stop running.  
Or if we go running let's do it on our own  
And then we'll find out who's more important.

They fell quiet; no more their tick-tock was heard,  
Then each told its story in a song of its own.  
THE SONG OF THE BIGGER HORSE  
I'm quicker, stronger and more powerful,  
I'm more important throughout the twenty-four hours.  
I move forward the minutes and hours of time,  
No one is strong enough to do it as well as I do it,  
The small one is no good; it hardly does anything,  
As I've already said it does not run but just plods along.

S



## Alexander SHPATOV

was born in Sofia in 1985. He graduated from the American College and the Law faculty at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski.

He is the author of several short story collections: *Footnotes* (2005, Vessela Lyutskanova Publishing House) which won “Southern Spring” Prize for best debut book of the year

*Footnote Stories* (2008, Janet 45 Publishing House), which was nominated for the Helikon Award, published in German under the title *Fussnotengeschichten* (Wieser Verlag, 2010)

*Calendar of Stories* (2011, Enthusiast Publishing House)

*#LiveFromSofia* (2014, Colibri Publishers, published in English as well)

### #LIVEFROMSOFIA

#### Synopsis

Twentieth-century masters of the short story – Yovkov, Elin Pelin, Radichkov – perfectly captured the spirit and voice of rural Bulgaria; as their twenty-first century heir, Alexander Shpatov offers a brilliant take on urban Bulgaria, told in the unmistakable inflection of a hardcore Sofia native. #livefromsofia brings to life not idyllic villages and pastures, but looming monuments and underground labyrinths, back alleys and main boulevards, gray panel-block apartment complexes, as well as the hoodie-bedecked kids loitering around their entrances. With these stories, Shpatov helps all of us Sofiaphiles put our finger on why we love this strange and contradictory place and experience the 2.0 version of this city as never before.

*Angela Rodel, translator*



A sense of a city, a clever cartography via new languages and networks – this is what Alexander Shpatov’s stories draw us into. The best of them, such as “Yellow Brick Road,” “Panel-Block Church,” “Wise Men from the East Take OK Supertrans” and others easily mix fiction with reality, urban legends with new reports, they move past Five Corners, the National Theater, Youth II... The city, of course, is Sofia. As we would like to read it. A city with stories. And with legends.

*Georgi Gospodinov,  
author of Natural Novel*

## #LiveFromSofia

*Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel*

“Believe it or not, an elephant was shot here” - the guide points towards the main steps of Sofia University, then turns toward the park with the Soviet monument and tells the group how it used to be the zoo, how way back in '69 some freshmen snuck inside and let all the animals out of their cages, how the police, scared by the elephant and rumors about Prague Spring, immediately opened fire even though the zookeepers had already arrived, how once again thanks to the Czechs no one said so much as a word about it in the newspapers and how in the end all the freshmen were tossed into labor camps, while the animals were packed off to another place much farther from downtown with concrete cages suited to the purpose and the spirit of the times .

There's no point in rehashing Wikipedia, plus what are the chances that anybody in the group would remember what year Parliament had been built, who the architect was and that it is actually called “The National Assembly,” rather than Parliament? That's why he always added a little something of his own on the tours. When he was in a good mood and had a cool group like the one today - he would even slip in whole new stories and landmarks that nobody here even suspected existed.

Now, for instance, they're in front of St. Alexander Nevsky and the guide recalls that when they decided to guild the dome, it turned out they did not have any gold - after all, the country was gearing up for the Balkan Wars and all its resources had to go towards that. But Sofianites started a campaign, three dentists lined up in front of the unfinished cathedral and in four short weeks armed with only pliers and incense, they had extracted more than ten thousand gold teeth from the mouths of otherwise miserly laymen, some of whom had come from as far as Ruse or Turnovo especially to that end, so enthusiastic were they to see the church finished.

But there's no way he can make up the bombing raids of World War II. He just points at the Englishmen and Americans in the group and leaves them to nurse their guilty consciences. To comfort the little girl in the yellow jacket who immediately gets angry at her mother, as if she personally were to blame, he also tells them about the miracle that saved St. Sophia after a bomb fell through its roof, landed on the ancient mosaic floors, but merely bounced off and rolled under the altar, without exploding. Then he goes on to explain to everyone that

Sofia got its name precisely thanks to this basilica, it was one the first things people saw when entering the city. And St. Sophia means “Holy Wisdom,” Divine Logos, in case they did not know. “Philo-soph-y” comes from exactly the same root. In fact, the city should really be called Saint Sophia, like San Francisco, Sao Paolo or Saint Petersburg, for example.

Then they head towards the Military Club and as they pass the old Turkish barracks he tells them how rebels set the whole city ablaze to take revenge for the hanging of Vassil Levski, and how thanks to the April Uprising that followed there was not a single old house left downtown, and when they reach the yellow cobblestones, \* he gathers them all together, points at a furrow in the road and explains that on this exact spot, the Mercedes of one of Bulgaria's most powerful and shady businessmen was blown up, because no matter how many SUVs full of bodyguards he had protecting him, traffic is traffic and there's no getting around it - they should keep that in mind, in case any of them are mafiosos or drive armored Mercedes. This is one of his requisite jokes and he surely would have drawn it out even longer if the little girl in the yellow jacket had not tugged at her mother and pointed at the yellow cobblestones.

“What is it, sweetie?” The guide breaks off his latest story, but the girl feels shy and turns to her mother.

“Mommy, do not you see? It's the Yellow Brick Road! “Of course, it's a road with yellow bricks, honey, what else could it be, the mother replies drily, glancing rather anxiously at the suddenly inspired guide, who immediately jumps at this response and tells the little girl that he has something really special to show her - the others can follow along if they like.

The Yellow Brick Road, why had not he thought of it until now! The road from the Wizard of Oz, the ancient Via Diagonalis from Rome to Constantinople, which Dorothy follows to reach the Emerald City. Now there's a story!

Practically running, the guide leads them on, paying no attention whatsoever to the Russian Church, despite the fact that the group is ready and willing to snap at least a gigabyte and a half in front of it. They merely pass by the place where the mausoleum with the mummy had been - the mummy had refused to burn when they tried to cremate it - past the royal palace, on whose grounds rise the two ancient hills of Serdica, and past the national bank, whose vault was dug right on top of an underground river, which was why gold seemed to pour in there of its own accord, and only a minute later they are in the underpass in front of the Presidency, where the guide grasps the little girl's hand and leads her to the very end of the Yellow Brick Road.

Of course, only the foundations of the gate have survived, as well as the paving stones worn smooth by time and thousands of feet, but imagination fills in the rest. The gigantic doors with golden studs and door knockers held in lion's teeth, the flags waving from the tops of the five-cornered towers, the stern guards behind the crenellated wall and, of course, the wondrous Emerald City, which Dorothy would enter to find the Wizard of Oz, who alone can help her fly home to Kansas. So it is real, mom, the little girl jumps up and down, pointing at the ruins, we'll finally get to go home again, right? The mother does not know what to say, in any case she's sort of forgotten what happens in the Wizard of Oz, but like all the others in the group, she does not believe a word the guide says, it is as clear as day that he's been making stuff up the whole time, but what else could he do in such a dull city? There's no way three dentists could have yanked out so many teeth on their own and car bombs leave far more serious traces. To say nothing of this last story - she just wonders if he does that trick with the Yellow Brick Road every time so as to cut the tour short, or only pulls it out when there are kids on the tour.

The group soon starts grumbling about wasting so much time in front of a pile of rocks, so the guide finally tears himself away from the gate and leads them back up the stairs. They come out of the underpass right when the sun is setting over the boulevard in front of them and exactly at that moment from somewhere near Lyulin a tornado swoops down on top of them, following the wave of green lights on the road and only a minute later the vortex will have lifted them into the air to carry them far and wide through the skies of the world - returning everyone to where they belong.



## Rositsa *TASHEVA*

has three books to her credit and they have already established her as a talented humorist. She was born in 1946 in Sofia, where she has graduated from an English Language High School and then - from the French philology Department at Sofia University.

She has been on the staff of the "Sofia Press" Agency, the French Embassy in Sofia and the Bulgarian Embassy in Paris. Presently she is working as an editor at the *Colibri* publishing house.

After her experience in Paris she wrote the book "Of Diplomats and Men" (1998) in which the life of Bulgarian diplomats during the first years of democracy is described with a subtle sense of humour.

Her next book - "Domestic Apocalypse" (2000) - is a story about the everyday life of a typical and also untypical, but definitely weird family.

The novel "So much for Scottie" (2010) describes with a smile and sympathy one year in the life of a painter suffering from a lifelong crisis - loser with a heart of gold and a knack for easy living. For this book the author has been nominated for the **prize Novel of the year** and has been given the **HELIKON award for contemporary novel** (2010) *for the audacity to use everyday language in building up a masterful literary style, for her contribution to*

*the city folklore and vernacular, for the fine sense of humour, gleaming like mica in a granite rock, for the freaks she sees all around us and for her discovery of socialism as still living in the mind and thought of the contemporary Bulgarian.*

Rositsa Tasheva is one of the best Bulgarian translators from the French. More than 50 books of Balzac, Maupassant, Flaubert, Céline, Albert Cohen, San Antonio, Jean Jeunet, Kundera, Cioran and many others have appeared under her translating pen. She has been given *The Prize of the Union of Translators in Bulgaria* four times – in 1985, 1996, 2006 and 2013.

## SO MUCH FOR SCOTTIE

### *Synopsis*

Scottie is the nickname of a painter who stopped painting 20 years ago. Apart from not painting, he manages to accomplish several other things in his life: he gets married, he looks for a suitable job, he dreams of words, he haunts his favourite pubs and tries to sell a painting. Otherwise he needs nothing but money and love. Benny, the journalist, who is also a linguist and Bulgarophobe, Sonya, the pharmacologist, who also paints on silken scarves, Stefan the Social and his ancient car, Dr. Pesheva and her stingy husband, all march along with Scottie through the book's pages. There is also an academic, a professor, a flying cat, a sailing dog, a teenage girl and a student as well as prime-ministers, MPs, politicians, cops and all kinds of fauna to complete the picture of present-day Bulgaria.

The book has been structured in three layers. The first shows the life of Scottie, who meets with friends, haunts his favourite pubs, listens to heavy metal music, tries to put his canvasses on show in the pubs, puts up an exhibition, which ends in a scandal, looks after his daughter, goes to the seaside with her and with his ex-wife Pauline, planning to shoot a film there, but fails. In the meantime he falls in love with Sonya and decides to marry her.

Within a year Scottie goes through three major disappointments, all of them resulting from his sincere endeavours to achieve something, and a fourth one, quite painful – when Sonya refuses to marry him. This almost kills him and Scottie falls into comic despair, the outcome of which appears to him in the

form of a gin bottle.

Scottie is represented as an extravagant and useless person, full of good intentions, incapable of any constructive action, devoid of any ambitions, but truly and fascinatingly charming, because of the simple values he preaches, namely to have enough money for a decent life, to have loyal friends, to love and to be loved.

The second layer depicts the present Bulgarian reality in broad strokes and in its most absurd manifestations – from the illiterate journalists, teenagers and prime ministers to the world economic crisis and the paranoiac way Bulgarians prefer to think nowadays.

The third layer is reserved for minor city stories, which add colourful details to the narrative.

The book contains also an ancient Chinese thought: “In dusk you must not walk, in dawn you should arrive,” which Scottie tries in vain to understand and which he assigns to his friends as a task to solve. The thought has been solved at the end of the book, while Scottie, who is not one to suffer, gradually emerges from the depression and fills himself with hope for the future.

The novel ends with a picture of a dolphin and a quotation from a much-talked-about book: “Adieu and thanks for the fish!”

# So Much for Scottie

*Excerpt / Translated by David Mossop*

## Part One IN WHICH WE BEGIN

### 1. SCOTTIE AND SOME OF THE OTHERS

**T**hey called him Scottie, because his grandfather came from Gabrovo, a town widely known for its historical links with Aberdeen. Scottie's grandfather had been born in Gabrovo but had lived all his life in Knyazhevo. From the moment he arrived there he had tried to dispel all unwanted attempts to call him Gabbi, but was perfectly willing to be adopted, without the slightest hesitation or spiritual torment, into the noble clan of Sean Connery, whom no one had ever heard of at that time. That's all that is known about the grandfather who passed the name down to his son and from there to his grandson.

\* \* \*

Scottie was an artist somewhere in his forties. He had long hair and was well known for his legendary generosity. Despite this he liked his nickname, as much as he liked himself. Scottie liked to say that whenever he looked at himself in the mirror in the mornings, it pleased him to see how handsome he was. He used to say it years before Andrei Konchalovski unwittingly and involuntarily copied the words in the first line of his autobiography.

Scottie let his hair grow long after his national service in the army, declaring he would only cut it when democracy came to Bulgaria. By saying this, he unwittingly and involuntarily joined the ranks of Fidel Castro and his beard, whose revolutionary biography (Fidel's revolutionary biography) he had omitted to read. When democracy finally came to Bulgaria, Scottie refused to acknowledge it and made a second declaration that it wasn't democracy and that he would wait for the real one before cutting his hair.

Scottie lived in Lozenets, where his parents, may they rest in peace, had bought an apartment, and he rented out his grandfathers' house in Knyazhevo to tenants which provide him with drinking money. The apartment in Lozenets was bought years ago, when Lozenets didn't resemble modern-day Lozenets. Scottie lived on "Krado Sarafov St.", once known as "Oak Street" at a time when on the other side of it there was a water melon plantation and a cherry orchard. Scottie couldn't remember these times, however the fact remained: there once used to be a water melon plantation and a cherry orchard. The water melon plantation had once belonged to Scottie's grandfather and no one knew why

someone from Knyazhevo had bought a plantation in Lozenets. But this was not particularly important, since when communism came, his land was confiscated to make way for apartment blocks. The cherry orchard belonged to a Russian woman, whom the local children remembered as the very embodiment of capitalist evil.

The house in Knyazhevo had two stories and before renting it out, Scottie liked to hide the odd bottle behind the plant pots on the spiral staircase and used to surprise himself when he found a bottle just at the moment when he needed a drink. You could say that he spent his entire life in a state of constant surprise. That, however, was a relatively short period in his life.

Scottie was one of those artists who had given up painting long ago. The walls of his apartment in Lozenets were adorned with paintings from his last, post-modern period, which has expired at least twenty years ago. Apart from not painting, there were other things that Scottie did in his life.

1. He got married. He liked to get married.

2. He looked for work. There's not much that can be said about this, but what there is to be said, will be said later.

3. He had very interesting dreams. He often dreamed of words. One morning he woke up with the words "structural configuration" echoing through his head, and spent a long time wondering what the configuration was and where was his structure. He once dreamed of Todor Zhivkov getting out of his shiny Mercedes and entering his favourite (Scottie's favourite) bar in Knyazhevo, and devouring five portions of tripe soup and a plate of tomatoes and rice. Everyone in the bar had watched him in total amazement, while Scottie said to himself: "Hasn't he eaten since 1989?"

4. He went to his favourite bar in Knyazhevo on the day when he collected the rent. He visited his other favourite bars on the other days of the month.

The bar in Knyazhevo was run by a man called Sotir, who was famous for his kind heart that often moved him to give drinks for free. Instead of money he would accept all manner of objects, so gradually his bar had come to resemble a pawn shop. Underneath the bar itself, he had a pile of four or five woollen scarves, a dozen or so disposable lighters, a couple of long dried-out Parker pens, briefcases, a silver cigarette case, a camera and a kilogram of cheese in a plastic bag, not to mention a pile of passports. To be fair, the cheese which a generous client had exchanged for a fifty gram glass of brandy only spent a night underneath the bar. Until Sotir sold it on to his clients in the form of bar snacks.



# Peter TCHOUHOV

*Petar Tchouhov* was born on 23.06.1961 in Sofia, Bulgaria. He holds a B.A. in Library Science and an M.A. in Social Sciences. His works have been translated into 17 languages and included in many newspapers, journals and anthologies in Bulgaria and abroad. He plays guitar in rock bands, writes music and lyrics and presents his poems with the spoken rock band LaText (laxtext.eu). Petar has performed poetry and music at festivals and other events in Japan, USA, Russia, Switzerland, Germany, Hungary, Croatia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Macedonia. He is a member of the Bulgarian PEN Centre, the Association of Bulgarian Writers, the Sofia Haiku Club, the Haiku Society of America, the World Haiku Association, and Musicautor.

## *Some awards and distinctions:*

1995 – Ivan Nikolov Award: Best First Book for *Gradinata na slabata realnost* (*The Weak Reality Garden*) in the National Poetry Contest Yuzhna Prolet (Southern Spring).  
 1999 – Book of the Year for *Muleto na Pedro* (*Pedro's Mule*), Egoist Magazine.  
 2000 – Best short story in the Agatha Detective Story Contest.  
 2002 – Best verse collection for *Malki Dni* (*Small Days*), Ivan Nikolov Award.  
 2003 – A New Bulgarian Novel Special Award for *Snezhni Choveci* (*Snowmen*) in the Razvitie Holding Annual Contest.  
 2004 – Special Award at The Bridge of Love poetry contest.  
 2004 – Best Text Message Poetry Award in the First Text Message Poetry Contest sponsored by MTel

2005 – First Slaveykov Award for poetry.  
 2007 – First Poetry Award Golden Watch-chain.  
 2008 – The top prize at the 61st International Basho Festival in Japan.  
 2012 – Several awards at the 5<sup>th</sup> International Haiku Contest, Moscow, Russia.  
 2013 – Third Slaveykov Award for poetry.  
 2013 – First Prize at the Magic Called Love national poetry contest.  
 2014 – Second Prize at the In the Foot of Vitosha Mountain national poetry contest.  
 2015 – Nomination for the national annual award for dramaturgy, Shumen  
 2015 (for the play *Happy New Year* – co-authored with Alexander Manuiloff)

## *Bibliography*

*Gradinata na Slabata Realnost* (*The Garden of Weak Reality*), a collection of verse, 1995, Fond DG, Sofia.

*Runi* (*Runes*), a collection of verse, 1998, Izdatelsko atelie Ab, Sofia

*Muleto na Pedro* (*Pedro's Mule*), short stories, 1999, Svobodno poetichesko obshtestvo, Sofia.

*Provincii* (*Provinces*), a collection of verse, 2000, Literaturen vestnik, Sofia

*Malki Dni* (*Small Days*), a collection of verse, 2002, Zhanet 45, Plovdiv.

*Snezhni Choveci* (*Snowmen*), a novel, 2003, Razvitie, Sofia.

*Po-Skoro Nikoga* (*The Nearly Impossible*), a play, short stories, and verses, 2004, Zhanet 45, Plovdiv. Performed on stage from 2004 to 2010 by @lma @lter Theater Laboratory.

*Tri* (*Three*), a collection of verse, 2010, Zhanet 45, Plovdiv.

*Bezopasni igli* (*Safety pins*), haiku, in Bulgarian and English, 2010, Ciela, Sofia.

*Kogato Se Zavrushtat Ednorozite* (*When the Unicorns Return*), a collection of verse, 2011, Ars, Blagoevgrad.

*Bioráin Dhúnta* (*Safety Pins*), haiku, in Irish and Bulgarian, 2012, Original Writing, Dublin.

*Igri bez igrachki*, books 1, 2, 3 (*Games without Toys*), children's stories, 2012, Trivas, Sofia.

*Más-más csönd / Razlichna tishina* (*Different silence*), Anthology of Bulgarian Haiku (compiler and editor), in Hungarian and Bulgarian, 2012, Napkút Kiadó, Budapest.

*Kamuflazh* (*Camouflage*), a collection of short stories and a novel, 2014, Zhanet 45, Plovdiv.

## CAMOUFLAGE

### Synopsis

*Camouflage* is Petar Tchouhov's twelfth book. It contains seventeen stories and a short novel; some of the stories have been published over the years in print and online literary journals. Several works have won prizes such as the Agatha Award (for detective stories), the Erunsmagazine and LiterNet Prize for Short Fiction, and the Development Prize (for the best new Bulgarian novel).

These stories are meant for sensitive, perceptive readers, or in other words – for an intelligent audience. They tell of the small, everyday occurrences that make up a world which at first glance seems very mixed-up, jumbled and absurd. The seventeen stories in *Camouflage* ostensibly trace a boy's growth into a man, passing through all the painful stages of his maturation process. Intimate memories from his childhood and teenage years, interwoven with the ruminations of an already grown man, jump back and forth in time, just as our memories engrave themselves on the present and destroy our dreams of the future. The stories could be knit together into a single macro-text, yet their self-containedness and individual dynamics function as a whole – albeit dismantled – mechanism. They present a hypothesis about the visible world, a version of what has been experienced – placing the biographical within the framework of what has not happened, of what is desired, of what has been missed.

In this sense, the short novel turns up at exactly the right place and time – bringing the composition to a close or allowing it to expand. *Snowmen* is a collection of narrative fragments, stories from childhood, humorously served-up family chronicles, episodes from the army, love and music. It is a constellation of essayistic monologues, picturesque lyrical metaphors, dreams, visions, snatches of poetry, many memories retold in an almost dream-like style... Despite its constellational structure, the book has a clear plot both on the narrative and symbolic level. It ironically deconstructs the cliché that a boy becomes a man in the army. The work's erotic thrill comes from the fantasy of the many women around the Chosen One.

From the piercing sharpness of childhood memories to the touching fragility of snowmen in the harsh world of the army, Petar Tchouhov's prose is rich in suggestions and hints, in quiet crises and superficially suppressed pain. Here, too, we find the ingenious whims and witty jests that so strongly mark the writer's poetry. One the whole, however, *Camouflage* is more personal, more inward-looking than his poetry – behind the irony lurks a raw, deep sensitivity.

## Under the Skin

Translated by: Ivaila Pesheva, Hristina Ivanova, Nenko Tsatsarov



The aged actor's face seemed to reflect the walls of the restaurant – the rough bricks intentionally exposed here and there under the plaster, the painted Secession-style windows and the crevices created superficial depth. He lit a new cigarette, and as the smoke was winding along on its usual path, his wild eyes seemed to say: we have nothing to do with these bags, with the hanging corners of the mouth that turn a smile into a stray cat.

Right across from him, a young woman in a yellow top was playing under his gaze. Then she got up and collected all the props left from someone's lunch on the neighboring table. She took them to the kitchen where someone unseen was clattering with cutlery. She came back with two small beers and a shot glass of crème de menthe. The amber and the troubadour green complimented each other – tossing hiccupping light back and forth, holding the shadows at bay.

“Thornapple, you say?” the actor drawled, when the yellow spot took up its place before his eyes once more.

“Yes, it's all over the balcony. It comes up from the concrete, from the iron-works... Even from the laundry I had forgotten to take inside.”

“Interesting!” The blue of his eyes gave way to the glimmer of the drink. “Nothing grows from my laundry. Must be the fabric. Or maybe it's because I

take it to the local laundromat. Do you hand wash?”

“Yes, I wash by hand, I cook on foot, and I never stay in bed when I’m ill!” she almost sang.

“Well, I can do calculations in my head. In high school I was a notorious mathematician. I could multiply the speed of light by the speed of sound at supersonic speed. We just met half an hour ago, and I already think that you look quite pretty!”

The woman stood up again, this time to take an order. Short, with the body of a rodent, she seemed to round off the tables she passed by. The blue-eyed man sleeked his hair back – a yellowish-white color, which appeared grey in photos. He moved his chair a bit so that he could lean back more comfortably and noticed that he had not pulled up the zipper of his pants. He tugged at it nervously, looking around like a paratrooper. Relieved, he took a sip of his beer. The yellow lady came back and sat on the edge of the chair. She was waiting for a call from the kitchen.

“What time do you get off?” A tense question, but uttered calmly, with the casual tone of an actor.

A red-head with short hair, the woman actually only looked young. Maybe she had two or three kids? Maybe she hated answering?

“Get off what?” she asked.

The man’s hand secretly checked his zipper situation under the table. Everything was in order, so with a rush of self-confidence he said over the glass: “Would you like to see my thornapple? You have thornapple on the balcony, I grow mine under the sink!”

“I bet you have nothing but empty bottles under the sink,” she answered.

“She likes me!” the actor thought. He took her by the hand and tried to kiss her. But she hastily stood up.

“I have work to do!” she said.

Off to the kitchen once more – and back again with full plates. She set them down carefully as if they were exhibits in front of a beefy guy sitting a few tables away. He immediately dived in with barbaric enthusiasm. She came back.

“My shift ends at four,” she said.

The actor felt a gentle warmth somewhere inside him.

He looked at the clock. Alas, he had time – enough time to get drunk. The woman understood and asked him: “Won’t you eat something?”

“Give me a break, I gain weight just from breathing.”

“You must eat well if you’re growing thornapple. Otherwise, it’s dangerous!”

she exclaimed.

“Well, since you’ve decided to look after me, bring me a fried potato,” he said.

“Do you want it whole or sliced?” she asked.

And so they talked, then he ate a bit. Time finally got up its courage decided to let them leave. The virginally fresh yellow next to the heavy dark brown coat weighing down the masculine figure. They got there quickly – it was close by and being anxious they were almost running. The entrance swallowed them up with the half-smile of its rickety door.

“Don’t worry, the neighbors aren’t nosy,” he reassured her after he saw she was looking around furtively. “I finished them all off with cockroach poison!”

They went into something like an apartment. There was a sink, and in it – dishes. Underneath – a cupboard that couldn’t be opened.

“Don’t touch it! I keep my wife’s body in there!” he said.

“And where’s the thornapple?” she asked.

“Under the bathroom sink. But it’s almost invisible – it can only be seen by someone who takes their clothes off and stands in the shower!”

She took her clothes off and got in the shower. She had locked the door to tease him. Or simply out of embarrassment. He was knocking on the door and talking nonsense. When she came out wrapped in a towel, she saw that he was naked. He took her to the bed and started biting her breasts. Not so hard, she wanted to say, but knew there was no point. She relaxed in his arms. Her body slowly swelled, she felt the thornapple breaking through her skin, growing and filling the mouth of the man blinded by passion.

T



## Georgi TENEV

is a novelist, short story writer and playwright.

His novel *Party Headquarters* (Altera, 2006) brought him recognition, winning the VIC Bulgarian Novel of the Year Award (2007). The novel came out in Spanish from the Baile del Sol Publishing House in 2010. Open Letter Books announced *Party headquarters's* publication in US (February 2016). *Holy Light* (2009) is a book of short stories featuring issues of biopolitics, racism, sexual difference, violence. *Mr. M* (Altera, 2010) is about the fate of Georgi Markov – a Bulgarian émigré-writer who was killed in London at the height of the Cold War. M's story brings together diverse themes: the saving of the Bulgarian Jews, Prague Spring, the propagandistic power of television, the bankruptcy of socialist literature.

Georgi Tenev writes plays that have been produced by leading Bulgarian directors. The renowned theatre troupe Sfumato has toured stages in Paris, Nancy and St. Petersburg with his works.

In 2012, Tenev received the Askeer Prize for Best Bulgarian Play. His radio play *The Atoll* won the “Best European Radiodrama of the Year” at the prestigious PRIX EUROPA festival in Berlin.

In 2013, Georgi Tenev made his debut as a film screenwriter. He is co-author of the script “Alienation,” which premiered at the Venice Film Festival and was awarded the Federa Prize, as well as the prize of Europa Cinemas Label (Special Mention) for best European film.

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*and Free Love*. T.A.G. Altera 2008 trilingual edition

*Party Headquarters* (2007)

Georgi Tenev (2010). *Casa del Partido* (Traducción de Francisco Javier Juez Gálvez). Baile del Sol.

### BIOPOLITICS, WAR AND ROMANCE – ARE WE READY FOR THE CREWEL MIRACLES OF THE FUTURE

*The places:* The Institute, Bulgarian Cinematography, the noname valley in Africa, The City. The personages: Pair of lovers, a gipsy, a homosexual, a psychopathic killer cop.

*The outcome:* Beauty will save the world.

Georgi Tenev's HOLY LIGHT is a story collection that combines politically based Sci-Fi and stunning erotic explications. This provoking alloy seems to give the clearest expression of his intellectual envisions. Eroticism and violence bring us to elaborate conclusions surpassing the any elementary didactics. The book impresses us with versatile narratives trespassing national borders and breaking ideological and sexual taboos. In Tenev's new world the laws of history and politics are set on fire by modern elites and rampant invasion of new generations.

The short stories in the HOLY LIGHT collection remind us of how science fiction was the genre of the Cold War and what the wars of today are. “Whom does the future belong to?” is one of the key questions here and the answer given is scandalously erotic and exciting.

Approaching this work we must be fully aware that we don't have Sci-Fi style of our authors from the Communist Period, namely Pavel Vejinov and Luben Dilov. What would happen if we combine the romantic irony of Brothers Strugatsky, the cyberpunk nightmares of Philip K. Dick and Anthony Burgess (*Clockwork Orange*) and the political intuition of George Orwell? Well, this is a modern and successful attempt at the “literature of ideas”.

*Stalkers* (reference to *Roadside Picnic* by Strugatsky) roam the radioactive fog over Kozloduy. The City is a ghetto suffocating all sparks of humanity. Bodies have succumbed to sinister biopolitics. The situation is not even post-apoca-

lyptic – the Apocalypse continues, the Revolution continues, nothing goes like this – neither cruelty and perversity, nor the holy light of love.

The book does not need any reference notes if it is to be read by a foreign recipient and yet it is to be considered as *highly Bulgarian book*. The references to both Bulgarian reality nowadays and to the Bulgarian historical mythology are easy to recognize. And, of course, the grim future of this funny country J

The writer's imagination seems inexhaustible in plot building. The literary language used is mainly laconically hypnotic narration. What is often a characteristic virtuoso-feature of short stories as a genre, namely the refinement of style that compensates the lack of the large world-building of the novel – we have that here.



## The Valley

Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel

In despair, he left Moscow. He was looking at his handwriting on the customs declaration, chaotic and nondescript, that's how it seemed to him. It was too late to change now, he had already reached a certain age. He didn't see any options, he didn't see a direction or an exit. In first class they offered easy emancipation, perhaps even *electrocution*, but he was traveling economy class where they wouldn't even serve him food.

His suitcase was small, but heavy due to the bricks and the moist bread. He sat in the third class section and began masturbating. His penis hurt from

the accumulated exhaustion and frequent friction. His hands weren't clean, they felt swollen from carrying his luggage, they felt unpleasantly warm. He rubbed hard, but he was barely able to secrete any semen. He collected about five milliliters. The machine in the hallway gave him four dollars and didn't print out a

receipt. Depressed, he went back to his seat. Even if he started up with the friction again it would still take a half an hour. And he would only produce a few drops. If the ejaculation was less than two milliliters, the machine wouldn't take it.

He sat and touched the four dollars through the cloth of his pants.

7:30 AM. The escalator brought him out onto the street. It was dusty and the air seemed thinned to him. He clenched his teeth and waved at the cabs. One of them pulled away from the taxi stand and lumbered over to him. It moved somehow between the lane and the sidewalk, uncertain of whether to stop. The door didn't open for a long time, but finally the locks clicked. He caught the whiff of an air freshener. He knew that just one wrong smell could set off his allergies. Induce the full cessation of ejaculation, cause swelling.

Despite the fresh scent of lemon, inside the taxi there was a hint of rot.

The hotel was the same. He went to his room and laid down. After a time he got up, without remembering whether he'd slept or lain there with his eyes closed. He didn't feel rested. He washed up in the bathroom, the water wasn't warm, but it wasn't cold either. The soap didn't lather. He left the bathroom feeling like he hadn't bathed at all. He got dressed and left.

The taxi stopped in front of number nine and practically threw him out, the door slammed behind his back. He climbed the stone steps and rang the doorbell. As he waited he didn't look around, but he felt the unpleasant gaze of the video camera mounted in the glass sphere above his head. Something in there was jiggling and whirring, the lens was focusing. The door opened, but he didn't see anyone. The staircase inside was lit up. There was a red carpet covering the steps, held in place by brass rods. For a second his head started spinning, he seemed to be back on that bridge above the river, with the quivering ropes on either side and the chasm above the muddy water. The whistling of the wind, the crests of the underwater rocks jutting through the surface. The shaking of his legs. He gathered his strength and took a step. The terror passed. The soft red carpet, the wood. The handrail to the right, the paneling to the left. He knew that he was in this place, here and here alone, and not above the river, not in Africa. No more Africa ever again, he told himself and swallowed hard, it was scary to think about that now. He just had to climb the stairs.

\*

"I visited libraries and read a lot of books," he said once they'd ushered him into the room. In the beginning, of course, they started with questions such as how did he feel and what had he been doing with his time since he'd been back on this side the equator. So, libraries, is that right?

“Well, did you find anything?”

He swallowed hard, he didn't have the strength to answer, he didn't have strength to waste. He got up and left. He didn't want to receive anything more from the foundation, he didn't want their money, their support, their associated programs. Now he didn't even want the loan anymore. If he took the credit, it would mean that his seminal vesicles would become theirs for all practical purposes. He would have to give 100 milliliters a day or they would remove them in order to transplant them into some anonymous recipient. But nevermind, he'd already turned them down. He was almost as downcast as when he left Madrid, as when he flew out of Moscow. He had wasted a lot of money on those flights. But at least he liked flying. That was all over now, however.

\*

He went to a job interview. They hired him, it was a mixed school. He had applied to be a language teacher, but they put him in charge of gym classes instead. On the second day he got sick of hanging from the bars while the children just watched him. He organized a theory class for them in a regular classroom like the other teachers had. Using illustrations he described various kinds of exercises. He sketched out a chart with equations for muscle mass. The kids were making noise and not listening to him. But who would listen to a monkey-teacher, covered with hair? It didn't bother him, though, the children radiated something good and natural. He met their eyes and saw the smiles. During the middle of the class he left them to copy out the charts on their own. He also sat and stared at the sheet of paper in front of him. It was a sketch he'd prepared before the class, a chart with muscle mass and a small diagram of the horizontal bars and the uneven parallel bars. The classroom was buzzing. He found it pleasant. All of a sudden some kind of anxiety, some vague thought seized him. He jumped, jerked up his head. Chills ran down his back. He couldn't figure out what had happened, yet he knew that he'd forgotten something. He hadn't done something, something important. Then he suddenly remembered the machine, there in the hallway. He hadn't masturbated. How long had it been? He got up, his legs swayed. He slowly made his way towards the door. He couldn't have run even if he had wanted to, so he simply walked, he had to reach it. How many hours late was he? He didn't know. He felt like he had just woken up, but the nightmare was only beginning now, the dream wouldn't stop. As he opened the door, he unzipped his pants and fished his penis out of his underwear. He stepped through the doorway already rubbing himself with a shaking hand. How late was he?



## Kalin TERZIYSKI

is a contemporary Bulgarian writer.

He was born on March 22, 1970 in Sofia. He graduated from medical school and specialized in psychiatry. He took up various jobs such as a carpenter, interviewer, sanitarian, copywriter, editor, etc. From 1996 to 2001 Terziyski worked as a physician at the Kurilo Psychiatric Hospital.

Since 1995 he has engaged in journalism and various artistic activities in radio, television and shows. Terziyski publishes his texts in periodicals such as the magazines *SAX*, *Egoist*, *Edno*, *Night Life*, *Eva*, *Club M* and in the *Trud* group newspapers. Kalin Terziyski started to write poetry and fiction in 1997.

He was one of the winners of the *European Union Prize for Literature* (2011).

Golden Quill Award (2013) for contribution to Bulgarian culture.

Awarded Most Popular Bulgarian Author (2014) by Sofia City Library.

## Bibliography

**Poetry:** *Salt* (2008), *New Poems at the Very Beginning* (2010), *The Advantages of Posing* (2011)

**Short stories:** *13 Pieces of Broken Time* (2008) *Strict Thoughts with Strange Dressing* (2009), *Is There Anybody to Love You* (2009), *The Love of a 35-Year-Old Woman*

(2010), *The Good Man's Name Day* (2011), *Noah Gives the Last Orders to the Animals* (2012), *The Rulers* (2014), *Collected Stories* (2015), *Scattered Stories* (2015)

**Novels:** *Alcohol* (2010), *Insanity* (2011), *Soldier* (2012), *The Love of a 45-Year-Old Man* (2013)



### ALCOHOL

#### Synopsis

The novel *Alcohol* is a story about a drunkard who succeeds in giving up his alcohol addiction.

It is a story about inebriation and inspiration and also about those disastrous mornings of hangover when life turns out to be absolutely unbearable.

The novel "Alcohol" can be read in different ways depending on what the reader is looking for in it. There is an intrigue of a close friendship, ruined by a strange mysterious or insane lady; it is about art created by the generation which has wildly grown on the remains of social realism and infected

by modern consumerism; this is a book about the man who endeavours to get the best share for himself, to be that "fatty circle on the plate" no matter how pernicious it proves to be. According to him it is more pernicious to belong to "the soup of conformism."

The main character of the novel, Kiyō, is a middle-aged writer, who used to work as a psychiatrist. He is an alcohol-addict and takes handful of tablets daily. He has given himself over to despair. Now and then he is fortunate to be given a job as a script-writer; very rarely some publishing houses accept his pieces of writing, he lives on a shoe string. He abandons his family, gives up his job as a psychiatrist, local drunkards become his new friends... the only person who understands him and keeps him company for drinking, writing and adventures with young ladies is a popular TV journalist, Martin, famous for his sharp tongue and formidable pen. When Kiyō comes close to the edge and feels that his life is about to come to the end and that death has come to his porch, a strange elderly lady calls him saying she is his admirer called Martha. They start talking every day on the phone and on Skype. At first the writer feels irritated with the lady's rude manner; she meddles in his private life and asks him provocative and confusing questions. However, she gets to find out a lot about him with her questions, lots more than he will ever realize, her insights are on the edge between sensible logic and occultism. The former psychiatrist and present bohemian writer has been challenged and given a chance to reconsider his life, revise his friendship with Martin, his path to sure death. And just at the same time the most venomous extracts of his talks to Martha are published in mass media, they are so pungent that are able to ruin the career of his only devoted friend, Martin. This treachery puts an end to their friendship but turns out to become salvation for Kiyō. The novel proves to be multi-layered. In the foreground it is almost scientific research into the phenomenon of alcoholism (the author really is a psychiatrist) and the ways it is treated. Here one can find clear practical recommendations about how to overcome this disastrous addiction. At the same time it is a careful dissection of Bulgarian society of the late twentieth century. Alcohol comes to denote not only a real substance but also turns into a metaphor of addiction in general, into an image of the constrained spirit. But the novel is even broader. It is a story about despair and salvation, friendship and its loss. The author defines his novel as a thrilling poem about the victory of the free spirit.

The book was written a year after the author had given up drinking alcohol, on his own without any special therapy. He did it only due to his own consciousness and a thoroughly traced revival of his own will power.

# Alcohol

## Excerpt

### 1. Martha: Long live the fans

It can't have been much after eight in the morning when the telephone rang. After last night's vodka, the hangover hadn't yet reached the stage of withdrawal symptoms. I wasn't shaking but I felt really weak. "Why's my phone ringing on an April morning? Who's got the strength to ring so early? Filthy bastards!" I said half-aloud and remained lying in my bed for a few more seconds. Then I got up and the day began.

I had fallen asleep five hours earlier. The last thing I could remember from the world of the waking was the taste of a 200cl glass of alcohol. I went over to the telephone. I lifted the receiver.

"Hello!" I felt my heart flutter twice. Those flutters are actually little extrasystolic deaths which happen when your heart beats out of rhythm and sometimes stops, just like that, completely painlessly. And you're dead, just for a little while. Actually, I don't really know whether it really does happen like that, just for a moment. Or whether you just have to sit there and wait to see what will happen. My heart went back to normal again.

I went to the fridge holding the receiver. I felt tense and feverish. I opened the door of the fridge, listening to the receiver, but there was no one on the line. There wasn't anything in the fridge either. Eggs. Wrinkle cream for someone's sad eyes. I felt another quiver run through my body. I opened the freezer section. I found a half-full bottle, three hundred and seventy grams to be precise. When it came to measuring quantities, I'm like a German-made measuring device.

"Hello!" I heard a male voice, apparently lacking in self-confidence, on the other end of the phone.

I took the bottle out of the cold dryness of the freezer compartment. My fingers froze to it. I opened the bottle and drank.

It was something I had done every morning for the past three years.

.....

I could hear the voice mumbling in the receiver. I didn't understand a word of what he was saying to me. Alcohol is deaf and blind before it drinks its morning "eye-opener". Until then it's only aware of the irritants around it. But after it takes a drink, it becomes revived, sensitive and witty, even tender.

Everyone is its friend. It wants to melt like a cube of sweet ice and embrace the world in a huge bear hug.

When I first heard the voice on the phone, I sensed something threatening about it, but that was my normal morning state of alcoholic paranoia. The young man on the other end of the phone was in fact speaking calmly and quite quickly. Feeling reassured, I coughed and said.

"OK. Could you say that again please?"

"All right. Hi. I'm calling on behalf of my mother. Her name's Martha Pavlova. She hasn't been able to get through to you. She really likes your book and wants to meet you."

"What does she like?" I took another swig. I waited for the alcohol to permeate all the extremes of the wreck of my body where my soul lived.

"Your book - *The Trinity Project*."

"Oh, that book. It's not actually just mine. It was written by three of us: Karbovski, Terziyski and Konstantinov. "So your mother, your mum....Your mum likes it, Does she? That's nice to hear. What do you want me to do?"

"Well, my mother would.... it would be really nice if you could my mum a call, she'd like to get to know you." The young man on the other end of the telephone didn't seem too keen. As though he was doing it against his will.

"So, your mum's a fan of mine? How old are you, if that's not a rude question? We haven't really introduced one another, I'm Kalin Terziyski, but that's obvious really... and you?"

"I'm Nikolai, Martha Pavlova's son, and I'm thirty-six."

"OK, then. Have you read our book?"

"Well..., no, but my mum said it's great. She's a really big fan of yours." He muttered. "And she asked me to find you, and ask you to ring her...if that's all right. She likes your bits most of all."

"I can't believe that?!" Being set apart from my friends, Karbovski and Atsi, by some ambiguous and awkward flattery, made me shiver with irritation, so I took another two gulps. "I'm no better and no worse than them. Anyway there are some bits of the book which aren't signed individually, they were written by us all."

"No, my mother said that you made the strongest impression and she'd be very pleased if you could call her personally. She asked me to do everything I could to find you."

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# Vladislav TODOROV

teaches film and cultural history at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of several scholarly books on modernism, political aesthetics, performing and visual arts, terrorism and global governance. He has contributed articles and essays to journals such as *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, *College Literature*, *L'infini*, *Neue Literatur*, *Likovne Besede*, etc.

Todorov's first creative pieces appeared in *Post Modern Culture* (1993) and *Chelsea* (2004.) His debut novel *Zift: A Socialist Noir* (Plovdiv: Janet-45, 2006) was a finalist for the 2007 Bulgarian Novel of the Year and a nominee for the Elias Canetti National Literary Prize. It has been published in English by Paul Dry Books, Philadelphia, 2010. It is also available in German, Polish and Latvian.

## Bibliography

### Novels

*Zift: A Noir Novel*

Janet-45, Plovdiv, 2006

Translated in English, German, Latvian and Polish language.

### Award Nominations

Vick Prize for the Bulgarian Novel of the Year, 2007

National Literary Prize "Elias Canetti," 2007

*Zincograph*

Fama Publishers, Sofia, 2010

Bulgarian Novel of the Year 2010

National Endowment Fund "13 Centuries Bulgaria"

National Literary Prize "Elias Canetti," 2010

### Screenplays

*The Color of the Chameleon* (working title *Zincograph*)

Genre: Spy-Comedy-Thriller

Director: Emil Christov

*Zift: A Film Noir*

Director: Javor Gardev

Sponsored by the Bulgarian National Film Center and the National TV.

"... an instant midnight fest fave."  
*Variety*

Bulgarian entry for 2009 Foreign Oscar.

### Short fiction

*In Bulgarian*

Operation Lucifer, *Granta BG*, Fall, 2013

Sun-struck Daydreaming, *Capital*, Nov 19, 2013

In the Bosom of the Bulgarian Police Happiness" *Fakel 2*, 2009

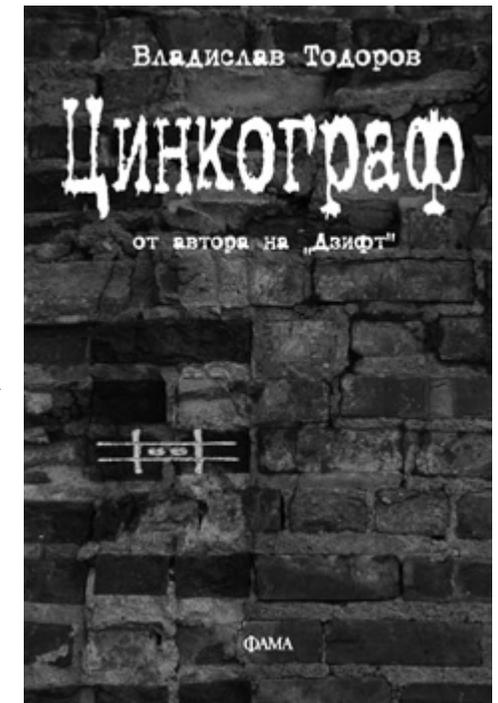
### In English

The Somersault. *Chelsea 76* (2004)

The Four Luxemburgs. *Postmodern Culture*, January, 1993

Absinthe: *New European Writing #17* (excerpt from "Zincograph")

Author of four books of essays.



## ZINCOGRAPH

### *Synopsis*

A cunning young man named Batko becomes an informant for the communist secret police. He quickly learns the techniques of clandestine work, conducts his operations with great zeal and ingenuity, and yet he is dismissed, as Perestroika renders him useless. Spying and denouncing prove to be his true, obsessive vocation, so he continues his police activities privately. Batko realizes that the political police system is flawed in that its very nature is to be ironclad secretive, dependent on the presumed authenticity of the agents and recruitment based on automatic trust and silent fear. Its functions could be mimicked and its structures duplicated by rogue individuals posing as agents.

Batko opens a back door in the matrix of secret control. He becomes the spider in his own, private web of informants as he creates a phantom secret-police department by recruiting a group of unsuspecting university intellectuals to spy on each other. As a result, he develops a bizarrely organized archive with sensitive information about his recruits. Batko is so dedicated to his secret mission that he murders his landlady and turns her apartment into a safe house where he secretly meets with his operatives.

After the fall of communism Batko uses the archive to wreak havoc on the new government. His former recruits become prominent public figures. One of them, Chamov, an outspoken political leader under pressure and blackmail makes a media confession about his collaboration with the former secret police, revealing the identity of his recruiter and naming the department he worked for – SEX.

In an official statement, the Ministry of the Interior denies the existence of such a department and recruiter and calls Chamov a raving liar. Exposed and publicly humiliated, Chamov commits suicide, which fuels the scandal even further. Hard evidence surfaces that corroborates his confession and proves the existence of SEX, thus questioning the credibility of the Ministry of the Interior. The media is driven into frenzy. In an effort to cover its incompetence and contain the public outrage, the Ministry issues an amended statement electively “declassifying” SEX as a special unit of the former political police. This creates a strategic advantage and a unique opportunity for Batko to go after the Ministry. He launches a spectacular con-artist operation and leaves the country for Casablanca.

Zincograph is a quirky political thriller. A self-styled secret agent engineers a fake secret police unit that replicates and thus mocks the omnipotent system of control. His creation becomes a Trojan horse in the apparatus of fear, causing general chaos and making the whole political system function like one stupendous absurdity. The novel offers a paradoxical twist in the standard representation of totalitarianism as a society of victims and victimizers. This is a story without innocents. Secret policing reveals its dark nature not only in its nauseating cruelties, but most suggestively, in its deviant pleasures.

## Zincograph

*Excerpt / Translated by Vladislav Todorov*

### **The Boyhood of a Secret Agent**

**K**ira, holding a puberty-stricken boy by the hand, bashfully stepped inside the Juvenile Reeducation Facility in the city district “Hope.” Her other hand clutched crumpled pages from a book. She was the sort of hag whose flesh was slowly drying on her bones. Her deep-set eyes, emaciated lips, and flabby ears spoke of her troubled past.

The Pedagogue on duty met them sitting behind a heavy mahogany desk situated in the shades of a branchy philodendron. He was outfitted in a white synthetic shirt showing salty stains in the armpits and an elastic necktie that looked like a lewd garter. On the desk stood a massive paper-punch, military issue. A huge portrait of Makarenko hung on the wall next to a bookshelf stacked with propaganda pamphlets. It depicted the legendary Soviet educator surrounded by a bunch of jubilant boys with red scarves, and a jubilant boy comfortably sited in his lap. The desk drawer was wide open. Inside it a magazine of foreign origin sported pictures of sex-bombs mutilated with the paper-punch.

When Kira knocked on the door, the Pedagogue kept his cool and slowly pushed the drawer leaving it ajar. His teeth clenched and he smiled to meet the visitors.

“May I,” muttered Kira visibly embarrassed and pushed the boy forward.

“What brings you here, comrade?”

The Pedagogue showed her the chair.

“The boy,” answered Kira timidly taking a seat on the edge of the chair with the boy standing next to her staring at the portrait on the wall. “He troubles me

Comrade Pedagogue, deeply. How shall I put it ...oh dear!"

"Share and feel better, comrade. I am the Pedagogue on duty and this is what I do. I help those who share."

"His onanism... I am afraid Comrade Pedagogue... has become inveterate."

"How old is the boy?" The Pedagogue asked unperturbed.

"Eighth grade."

"How are you two related?"

"I'm his aunt... mother that is. I adopted him."

"What's his name?"

"Batko."

Kira pushed Batko forward and he promptly jumped on the Pedagogue's lap mimicking the portrait on the wall.

"As we eat dinner," Kira continued visibly surprised by the enterprising boy, "all of a sudden he jumps, like he did just now, locks himself in the toilet and stays there for hours... his food gets cold. He is losing appetite. I caught him using literature for the purpose." She handed over the pages and timidly inquired, "Comrade Pedagogue, which are the competent authorities that could help me fight this plague?"

"Onanism comrade, or otherwise known as masturbation, is ineradicable. It's part of the human condition. It has been with us since time immemorial. Public intolerance has always existed though and the fight against it began well back in Biblical times. God, as you may know, struck dead the first masturbator who went by the name of Onan, hence onanism Comrade. The guy was a minor biblical figure from the Book of Genesis but a major headache. He spilled his semen on barren ground the way he saw fit, indiscriminately wasting it while pursuing surrogate or non-vaginal satisfaction by means of manual stimulation of the genital thus artificially milking the reproductive gland..." The Pedagogue paused to catch his breath. "Be that as it may, according to the law of the land, onanism does not constitute juvenile delinquency, or crime, or any other statutory offense..."

The Pedagogue pushed Batko away and stood up, flipped his boner and went to the bookshelf, pulled a thick book named "Pedagogical Poem" and handed it to Kira saying:

"Read, science has spoken."

"What about pornography?" She pointed at the pages.

"This book chapter is well known to us. It was torn out from an officially published book, Rabbit, Run that belongs to certain library. We'll find it and restore it to its original place."



## Ludmil TODOROV

was born in 1955.

In 1982 he graduated from the National Academy of Theater and Film Arts in Film Directing. Ludmil Todorov wrote the scripts for and directed six feature films, which have won many national and international awards.

His first collection of short stories, *Loosing Winnie-the-Pooh*, was published in 1988. Ludmil Todorov is the author of two collections of short stories and five novels, including *A Barge in the Desert* (2013) and *A Summer Dissembled* (2014), both published by *Janet 45*.

*A Barge in the Desert* was the winner of the national Hristo G. Danov Award for Literature, 2013, while *A Summer Dissembled* was nominated for the Novel of the Year award and the Helikon, 2014 award.



## A BARGE IN THE DESERT

### *Synopsis*

The main character is a teacher of English in a prestigious high school. The story takes place around the turn of the century.

Two storylines interweave in the novel: one depicts the family, social and private life of the teacher, set in post-communistic reality; and the other – his spiritual experience that starts at the very beginning of the novel with a barge floating on the Danube. While the main character is watching it from his balcony, the barge disappears behind an apartment building and appears no more. This mysterious disappearance opens

the teacher to unexpected, unsuspected thoughts about the fate of man and existence in general. He is facing a ‘midlife crisis,’ well aware that the term is inadequate to the magnitude and gravity of such a spiritual collapse. Eventually, the teacher comes face to face with Nature. His mind no longer bothers with the daily grind of every human’s existence and focuses on what’s most prominent and most important – the pointlessness of human life.

‘People live without knowing why. Until recently I used to be like them, I didn’t care, a dense fog covered my mind. Now my mind has cleared. This is very unfortunate. I’d rather live with my mind fogged and my heart – light and easy.’

At the end of the novel the teacher realizes that what almost killed him in fact gave meaning to his life. Formerly a man of petty concerns and goals, he now turns into an observer of eternity.

## A Barge in the Desert

*Excerpt / Translated by Matey Todorov*

My wife and I saw each other seldom. The upcoming dismissals at the radio made everyone work harder than ever. I couldn’t imagine what would happen if she was made redundant. Ruse is not a town of many newspapers and radios. Despite her work load, my wife looked calm – she was a good journalist and her position didn’t seem at risk.

One night she got home late, about ten o’clock. I was in the living room, reading a contemporary English novel I’d got my hands on thanks to my connections at the foreign language bookstore downtown. Our daughter, as usual, was hanging about in the park.

My wife looked shocked, and I thought they’d dismissed her. After she got hold of herself, she said: “I saw our daughter kissing another girl in the park.”

I laughed out, this sounded ridiculous.

“How could you see her? It’s dark in the park.”

“It was light enough.”

“You’re mistaken.”

“I wish I was! But I doubt it: I passed a meter away from her.”

“It could have been a boy. They dress the same now.”

“It was a girl,” said my wife and leaned against the back of the sofa.

“How can you be so sure?”

“It was so... unbelievable that I don’t know how to describe it.”

“Tell me in a nutshell. Or give me the details if you prefer.”

“She winked at me.”

“Who did!?” I asked.

“The other girl. Our daughter was facing the other way, she didn’t see me. But the other girl did, and while I was passing by, she winked at me. And I’m sure it was a girl, not a boy.”

“She winked at you!” I exclaimed foolishly and laughed out more foolishly still.

I needed time to grasp what I’d heard. My wife needed even more time to grasp what she’d seen.

“Do you know her?” I asked.

“Whom?”

“The other girl.”

“I thought you asked if I knew my daughter.”  
 “I’m asking about the other girl.”  
 “I don’t know her.”  
 “You don’t know her, but she winked at you?”  
 “Yes, she did!”  
 “How come?”  
 “I don’t know, go ask her! They’re still making out on that bench.”  
 We fell silent again.  
 “I doubt she winked at you,” I said.  
 “Here we go again!”  
 “Why would she wink at you if she doesn’t know you?”  
 “Then she must know me!” my wife said. “She knows who I am and winked at me anyway! Do you like this version better?”  
 “No! Not at all!”  
 “Yet it is possible. She saw her girlfriend’s mom and gave her a wink. It’s the normal thing to do.”  
 “It’s not normal at all!”  
 “Has everything else been normal so far?”  
 In all our married life, we’d never talked so thoroughly.  
 “Why do you focus on the wink?” my wife went on. “I’m telling you our daughter is kissing another girl, and you worry about the wink.”  
 “Well, it’s very... strange.”  
 “What part strikes you as strange?” my wife would not let go.  
 “Both parts. It was you who brought up the winking.”  
 “Would you rather I spared you that?”  
 “No, but...”  
 “Alright! Assume I didn’t see right and there was no winking, okay? Try and focus on the main point!”  
 “If you didn’t see clearly—”  
 “Then it could have been a boy, is that what you mean? No, it wasn’t a boy, no matter how I wish it was. It was a girl. I was close enough, I saw her wink at me.”  
 Another silence. I felt panic creeping in: I had too many questions.  
 “So, the girl was facing you, and our daughter wasn’t. How can you be sure it was her?”  
 “You think I can’t recognize my own daughter from a meter away?”  
 “They dress the same now—”  
 “That’s your opinion! Their opinion, as well as mine, is that they dress

differently.”

“And you recognized her by her clothes?”  
 “Yes. It’s no problem for a woman. Besides, she is my daughter, remember? Even though she disowned me.”  
 “Whatever do you mean?” I asked amazed.  
 “I tried to tell her to leave her dirty laundry by the washing machine, because I don’t want to sort out the clothes in her room. We had a fight, we exchanged insults and she finished by saying ‘You’re not my mother!’”  
 What surprised me in this story wasn’t my daughter’s outburst. Lately the two had been fighting a lot. My surprise stemmed from the way my wife told me about it. She was not in the least upset, quite the contrary: she was in a fighting, hostile mood. My wife wasn’t such a person: she was cultivated, gentle and sensitive, she would never turn against her own daughter. I asked her:  
 “Will you talk to her when she comes back?”  
 “I don’t intend to.”  
 “Shall I?”  
 “I don’t care.”  
 “Don’t say that, she’s your daughter.”  
 “Is she!? I didn’t know.”  
 Things between them had worsened. I felt sad.  
 My wife left the living room. Ever since the radio took up all her time, she had changed. She used to be unstable and would often cry. Now she had gained self-confidence and I didn’t know what to think of it: I preferred my former wife, and at the same time I was happy her crisis was over.  
 I sat in the living room, pretending to read the contemporary English novel. In fact, I was impatiently waiting for our daughter to come home. I wasn’t even thinking about talking to her at this stage – I would reveal my source of information.  
 All our acquaintances knew what freedom we gave our daughter and wondered why we allowed her to stay out so late. You try to stop her, if you’re so smart! Our daughter feared nothing, not even the park at night. Her courage rubbed off onto us. Despite her patience and kindness, she could be very firm. She had fought for her independence ever since she was little. We could sense when she was defending her territory, and we’d learned to back off, lest she turn into a very unpleasant cotenant. Her mother had clearly invaded her privacy and now the two were at war.

T



## Todor P. TODOROV

is a doctor of philosophy and assistant professor at the Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University.

He is the author of two collections of short stories: *Tales for Melancholic Children* (Ciela, 2010) and *Always the Night* (Ciela, 2012). In 2012, *Tales for Melancholic Children* was published in Germany under the title *Hexen, Mörder, Nixen, Dichter: Dunkelmagische Geschichten* (Grössenwahn Verlag, 2012).

Todor P. Todorov has published reviews, analyses, translations and fiction in *Rodna Rech*, *Ah*, *Maria*, *Altera*, *Altera Academica*, *Christianity and Culture*, *Critique and Humanism*, *Literaturen vestnik*, the online edition of *Granta Bulgaria*, *Dnevnik*, *Standard*, *Philosophical Journal*, *Kultura* and other specialized magazines, websites and anthologies. In 2010, he was awarded the Rashko Sougarev prize for best fiction short story for his story “Van Gogh in Paris.” He is a night reading lover and ideologist.



### ALWAYS THE NIGHT

#### Synopsis

*Always the night* is a collection of 14 short stories. The stories lead through the delirium of night into a dangerously perverted world. A world of twists, madness and crimes. A magical underground, criminal utopia and film noir. Dark dreamers, urban shamans, pale brunettes, phone killers, machines of terror, white deer and other elegant birds of prey.

*Mitko Novkov*: Gothic stories, baroque expression. Or perhaps the other way around: baroque stories, gothic expression. Todor P. Todorov is a unique author for our geographical latitudes: macabre, erotic, skeptical, ironic. And most of all – inspiring; reading him is like walking through the darkest corners of the Cologne cathedral in the company of Mary Shelley while you’re talking about Mount Brocken, Caleb Williams and Foucault’s pendulum. Have a nice walk! But don’t get distracted, keep an eye on the words – they are strong, they are mellow, they are smart...

## One

*Excerpt / Translated by Doroteya Bogdanova*

Slow vapours of coffee overflow the windows, infusing the terraces where white melons are gently swaying, and sink into the town, fast trains, frozen movements like Marinetti paintings, and heat, of course, the heat, the rain, eyes like violets in a black and white film, silken screams, cigarette smoke in the keyholes, Hitchcock, lost phone numbers, a forgotten shoe with a heel at the train station, when the night pours down like a fog, like fire, a wave, skillful drowning men in the ease of the dark, sprouted clusters of forbidden grass, with brains smashed like headlight, lost and free, and fragile, the ghosts, the cats, everything is everywhere, the city towers, irregular chess boards, half-moon in the lips, dreams of glass and thrown away madness between tossed books, perfumes, cocoa, whispered kisses, glances, separations, gentle death, alcohol, bedsheets already read in which the small hour is warmly wrapped, the sleep of the tea pot, while you and me naked are rolling a joint, and you squander hair and minutes, and shuffle the cards of time, stirring the milk without caring, without rooting, weightlessly left, a dark herb, poison, a drizzle in Borisov Garden, a nocturnal butterfly over the umbrellas, the worms, the houses where the sleeping and the heretics are hiding, the fire starters, the sleepless ones, how empty are the parks at this time and how I want you to take my hand in the dark and tell me again, that the night is just one sentence.

## God of Night

*Excerpt / Translated by Doroteya Bogdanova*

It's already been three nights since I am here. I don't believe there is any way out and it doesn't matter anymore. The only thing that I am interested in right now are the nights. Always the nights.

I don't remember why I am here, among those savages. The last thing I remember is finishing off a glass of malt whiskey. Boeing 747. Beyond the glass there's nothing but endless blue sky. The clink of the ice cubes in my glass. I am drifting away.

When I awake I see the sun sinking amidst thick, thundery woods. These sulky arrays of vegetation grown wild look as if they could explode at any

moment, hurling wind into its restless recesses, chaos and horror among the entire world. The sky looks dark, heavy. As if made of steel. It's cold.

I live among primitive scents. The stink of stool, rotten fruits, sweat. Fresh blood. Life in its raw condition. The original.

In the first night they bring me rolled motley dry leaves. The roll is filled with a thick brown mixture, similar to sugar. After I've lit it, I suck in and my head fills with smoke. I observe the naked, filthy bodies of the savages and they seem more and more misshapen. I listen to the roar of the ground while they jump around and after that, I fly up with ease. My flight is a silent circle in the night sky. I slowly dive into the cool dew of the clouds. I can see the cell division, the electric shine of the molecules, the life, the arteries in which the blood seethes, the anger, the desire, the cold sleeping brains in the ground, from which snowdrops grow in the spring time. Death in the heart of the sun, stealing eyes, I can see the speed of the sperm, the angel of death, the birth of the earth and the secret alchemy of the dream, love and terror everywhere under the roof of night.

When I awake, I feel a dull pain in my head, my mouth shrunken and burnt from thirst. Fortunately, I find a clay pot full of clear, cold water next to my head. I drink from it and fall back to sleep under the thick, yellow rays of the tropical sun. At sunset I make my first attempt to escape. I don't know yet that it would be my last one. I lurk between ferns, red bushes, spiky trees and swamps. After half an hour the twilight begins to thicken. There is still no sign that someone's after me. I sink deeper into the ocean of the jungle, it's getting cold and humid and with nostalgia, I begin thinking of the hideous savages, their warm fires and their rolled motley leaves filled with sugar and moon dust, from which the brain vaporises, copulating the night. Around me giant carnivorous butterflies are swallowing birds whole and then they too are being eaten by carnivorous plants, awoken by the darkness and the scent of the night. I continue walking along the crushing beauty of the innate cannibalism. Scared creatures everywhere, with eyes grown from the darkness, nibble the flesh of their neighbours. Nature devours itself. Of course, I lose hope after an hour of trying to make my way through the thicket of nightmares only to end up back in front of the fire, with which my tribe lights the weeds of the night. Languishing, I relax my body on the ground and peer long into the dark sky.

T



## Emil TONEV

was born in 1964. He is a contemporary Bulgarian novelist and journalist. He became extremely popular among the Bulgarian public with the film version of his novel collection *The Border*. He is also a successful scriptwriter and playwright. Among his works are the play *The Fool on the Hill*, the TV novel *Sombrero Blues*, the documentaries *I Have an Idea*, *A Prayer for Baikal* and the novels *Hombre* and *Sometimes Angels*. His works have been published in Italy, Germany, Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia, etc.

### *Bibliography*

*The Border*, a novel, 1992

The Colours of the Son of the Wolf, poetry, 1993

*Sombrero Blues*, 1998, a novel

*Hombre*, a novel, 2000

*The Fool on the Hill*, a play

*Hombre*, a novel, second edition, 2014

### HOMBRE

#### *Synopsis*

Western, action and ancient tragedy define the genre of the novel which, in fact, is a deeply human parable of the search for truth. The author succeeds in including all the key themes for the Balkan Region – emigration, drugs, loneliness, skepticism, thugs, manipulated media... But most importantly he creates unique, unconventional characters and succeeds in both individualizing them and presenting them as a micro-model of the Balkans.

*Hombre* is particularly interesting – a local Forrest Gump who raises his frail voice against violence in an incredible way. The action indeed takes place “somewhere on the outskirts of Europe” but it is more than clear that the author knows perfectly well not only his national literary models but also the European and the international ones. Emil Tonev is a talented contemporary fiction writer sending a very strong message to the thinking reader.



### SOMETIMES ANGELS

#### *A short review*

In his novel *Sometimes Angels*, Emil Tonev attempts to reveal the valuable things in life and the importance of friendship. The author manages to simultaneously capture the reader’s attention with his specific sense of humor and make him sad. With a great dose of wisdom Tonev goes back to everything that he and his friends and loved ones had to go through over the years. *Sometimes Angels* tells of bygone socialist period which is of no importance because the emphasis is on the human stories.

# Hombre

Excerpt / Translated by Valentina Rasheva

Now it's my turn:  
'Sorry,' I say, 'let's not make life complicated, that's the last thing I want. We had a laugh, talked some shit, enough of that. I'm a dude, you're a dude, we're all absolute fucking dudes, we done the business, let's shake on it and get the hell out of here!' I get the dosh from the table, say 'See ya,' and am gone.

Yeah, but this won't do. Because, one, Hombre wouldn't like it one bit; two, I was never going to see Hombre, then three, and four... No, no way, this'll break the thread, and the thread, good or bad, was the only one I had. So: "Keep the change, ya twisted pooffer! Go buy yourself some candy!"

I'm saying this and at the same time wondering where I got that tinny voice from.

The other bloke turned his head and stared.

Open book, huh? Like hell! Every book you've read's got a couple of lines you missed or didn't read properly, I've noticed. And they often surprise you so much that at the second reading the book is completely changed. I guess my smile was quite ambiguous.

'Who d'ya think you are, you bugger?' he snorted and started toward me.

On the way he pushed the girl to the side and she slumped onto the couch.

'Who d'ya think you are, you bugger?'

I've noticed also that people have the unpleasant habit of repeating the same words when they're very angry and are no longer seeing straight. And once you stop seeing straight, you're a gonner. (An angry man can't even take a turn in the car, as Lyupcho said on another occasion.)

I take a step to the side, and then take a swing at him. My fist meets a nose. The guy is strong and stocky, but I'm no lightweight myself, so he crashes to the ground. The wagon shakes, one of the shooters outside misses and yells out a curse. (This I didn't see, but I can imagine it - the walls shook so much. And I should stop using brackets, I think I've overdone it.)

The unshaven one is trying to get off the floor. His nose is bleeding, but he'll live; he's wiping blood with his hand and swearing like a trooper. The girl's watching from the couch with genuine horror, obviously imagining what I'm about to get from now on. *Take it easy, babe, stay where you are and just watch* - that's what I wish she could see in my face, but then, who knows. The one

whose name I'll never learn is now standing up, staring at his bloodied fingers. He turns his eyes on me and states the obvious:

'And you hit me! Well done, eh!'

Then he suddenly throws himself toward me, but I'm prepared and expecting it. I pull to the side and stick out a foot from under him, at the same time giving him a nice push with my hand; I know some tricks, as they say. He staggers and spreadeagles on top of the girl on the couch. She gives out a slight shriek, more like a sob. I'm not quite sure how I acted, but obviously I was on top of it, as I managed to do what ensued. I could have tried to run, but the coach was blocking my way to the exit. I was stuck. The unshaven guy was rising, without letting me out of his sight for a second. I kept my eyes on him, too, while moving backwards until my back was touching the narrow door to the shooting gallery. I felt something behind my waist. The door latch. I slipped my left hand and tried it. It gave. It wasn't locked and opened outward. But I had to be rid of him somehow, otherwise he would get me. He rose so furious that didn't even notice how the towel slipped from around his waist and fell to the floor, leaving him stark naked. He rushed towards me for the third time and was very surprised when I just kicked the door with the heel of my boot and shifted sharply away. The dude was so stunned that he stopped on the threshold, as he was, in his birthday suit. I was hoping that the outside light would blind him and give me time. It happened just like that, but obviously my luck had also worked because, a moment before I dashed for it, I saw him clutch his head and roar. For a split second I realized that one of the shooters outside had hit him and this stiffened him altogether.

I couldn't resist it. I slid behind him, almost gently rested the sole of my boot somewhere between his waist and his hairy ass and pushed with all my weight. He popped out like a cork stopper, slung over the stunned fat woman and slammed onto the counter. He was squealing like a stuck pig.

Outside, he was squealing like a stuck pig while inside I was laughing like crazy. I had got hold of the thread, I could feel it in my sweaty palms. I didn't know where it would lead me to, but I wasn't going to let it go again. I had time. I could feel the pounding of every second, every little tick-tock of some internal clock telling me that it was giving me a few more of those tick-tocks, and it was up to me what I would use them for.

Use them for what? Well, here's what: I reach into the strongbox with the dosh in it, grab the wads of money bound in elastic, tear the elastic bands and toss them out the door.

A good thing about a wad is that it flies two or three metres in compact form before the notes start to disperse. Just so that the little flock won't burst apart until outside the awning of the shooting gallery. From there on, the wind takes them, the warm wind of the late summer, and the released light-feathered birds swarm in cheerful loops above the people - these traders in the marketplace of life, these actors on the stage of life ...

What a lot of flying this was. In the end, I flew, too, but out of the other door.

I felt with my skin that they were in pursuit behind me, so I knocked over behind myself whatever I could get my hands on - just like in the movies. I ran to the car with the foolish hope that it will start from the first attempt. This only shows how confused I was after the first successful attack - who could I escape from in this VW that did just a hundred and ten, full throttle, and then only downhill?

Thank God, I saw on time that two of those - the ones with the square shorts and flip-flops - were already there. So I changed direction - I could never beat them up, not a chance... The impact of surprise was not on my side any more, and the clock ticking out the seconds in my head had stopped. I slipped under the front of a huge lorry and they all lost me from sight.

I crawled, rolled and slipped, with a thump, between the rear tires. The first thing I saw was an old black truck. Black from dirt, not because of its colour. I didn't think then that it's the same black truck I had seen when I arrived here. I looked around, slid in through the passenger door inside the cabin and tried to curl up on the seat. Two centimeters from my nose, however, I saw soot-covered rough work trousers and felt the haunting smell of smoke. Had I been more metaphorically minded, I would have probably decided I was standing at the gates of hell. Only I had no time for metaphors. I raised my eyes slowly. They were met by the cold eyes of a skinny forty-ish man, smeared with black dust all over - the head of the stokers' shift, in charge of the stills or a tar wholesale trader, or something.

'Oi, what ya doing here, you? Beat it! I said, beat it!' the scrawny devil said with malice.

I opened my mouth to explain, but gave up. One move on his part, and they would find me. I slipped back out the door and looked around. Panic overwhelmed me. I saw myself beaten to a pulp, even dead, with my face smashed into the asphalt. All the stupid things I'd done until now couldn't go unpunished, even less with those guys - the feudal lords of the marketplace.

[...]



## Dimana TRANKOVA

(b. 1980) is an archaeologist by education and a journalist by vocation.

She has authored over a thousand articles on travel, politics, history and archaeology in her native Bulgaria.

She is the co-author of several bestselling non-fiction books such as *East of Constantinople/Travels in Unknown Turkey* (2008), *A Guide to Jewish Bulgaria* (2011), *A Guide to Ottoman Bulgaria* (2011, 2012), *The Turks of Bulgaria* (2012) and *Hidden Treasures of Bulgaria, Vol. 2* (2014).

She has been the executive editor of *Highlights*, Bulgaria's English-Bulgarian travel magazines, and of *Go Greece!* Bulgaria's magazine about Greece.

*The Smile of the Dog* (Colibri, 2014) is her first novel.



## FIREWALKER

### Synopsis

An American journalist and his young ex-pat Bulgarian wife arrive in Bulgaria to spend a few weeks with the parents-in-law. As John struggles to come to grips with the least-known land in Europe, a series of gruesome murders of historians, all perpetrated at ancient rock shrines, appear on the national news. While his wife's enthusiasm for get-togethers with friends and family fades and she realises that her home country has changed beyond recognition, the bored John employs Maya, an archaeologist-cum-journalist, to take him around the murder scenes and

explain the background. Fuelled by a growing attraction, they travel across an enchanted and cursed country scarred not only by the stone shrines and rituals of an ancient civilisation, but also by the traumatic fall-out at the end of the Communist regime and its enduring legacy of secrets and lies.

Soon the two journalists become entangled in a recklessly dangerous investigation of the sadistic assassinations where long-forgotten Thracian blood rituals, small and big time treasure hunters, cosmology, a sinister secret sect of young self-styled "Thracians", and Mircea Eliade's theories of the cyclical nature of time play out against the backdrop of a post-totalitarian society. Nothing is what it seems. John and Maya begin to discover that the only thing more dangerous than a serial killer set loose is the Bulgarian Mafia state of the 2010s.

As the ring of murders tightens around John and Maya and they become obsessed with the uncovering of ancient rituals, he realises that he is torn between staying with Maya and returning to the US with his unhappy and dependent wife. Meanwhile, the free-spirited but vulnerable Maya must stay behind and face the consequences of their actions.

This is an edgy, richly atmospheric, brilliantly conceived and elegantly written literary thriller, which masterfully weaves archaeology, philosophy, organised crime, the moral chaos of post-Communist Europe, and doomed love.

## Firewalker

Excerpt / Translated by Kapka Kassabova

### Prologue

The man on the rock could never have imagined himself asking this question. But then again, he could never have imagined himself in this situation to start with.

With an ordinary knife? he said. His mouth was dry. He'd kill for a bit of water.

"It's not an ordinary knife," said the other man. "It's iron."

The man on the rock couldn't see his tormentor in the dark but felt his hot breath every time he put a cut in his flesh with that ordinary knife of his.

The man on the rock shook with the pain and the insult of it, with the cold mountain air, too, and with the bleak emptiness that is left when dignity goes. At the beginning, he had refused to talk, partly out of vanity and partly because he was afraid the stranger would sniff the fear hormone on his breath like a dog, and pounce on him with greater ferocity.

But they'd been up here on the rock all night. Too much blood had flowed, its heavy smell intensified by the stench from his bladder. He felt very sorry indeed that he didn't have what his tormentor wanted, that he couldn't undo what had already been done to him, that he couldn't somehow fix everything.

He looked at the stars, brighter than ever, and imagined they were slowly revolving in the universe. The wind pushed his body, and he saw it being lifted up and carried away, over the mountain, towards the Milky Way. He knew he was going to die now, and he was filled with sorrow that his death was already here, and so undignified, too. He'd be an ugly corpse, with these wounds to his face, these slashes an embarrassing affair. He already saw the newspaper headings, the shocked faces of his colleagues, and the two among them he knew exactly which two who would gloat at his funeral. "Did you hear, they killed him with an ordinary knife!" they'd whisper and nudge each other.

You're feverish, he told himself, and the insult of it hit him again. He forced his parched lips to part.

"You're making a sacrifice," he whispered. He still couldn't see the other man.

"I am."

“To Her.”

“To Her.”

“For a sacrifice you need something more sacred.”

Iron is a sacred metal.

“No it’s not. Flint is. Copper. Gold. Not iron.”

For a wretched second he almost believed that his tormentor would buy this and let him go. The wonder, the beauty of that! But the man laughed.

“Bollocks,” he said and bent over him. His dark form blocked the starry sky from view.

The man on the rock felt completely abandoned.

“You’re not appreciating what is being given to you,” his tormentor said. “Iron is the most sacred metal in the world.”

“The ancients thought it warded off evil,” the man on the rock whispered. He couldn’t give up, not yet. It was true. In ancient times, no birth or wake would go without the protection of an iron knife, comb, or nail, to stop the newborn or dead man from becoming a vampire. He was surprised at the clarity of his thoughts and made a painful effort to speak clearly too. “What was sacred to them was the ironsmith’s trade. It’s the people who give it form that are sacred.”

“I’ve given this knife form,” the man said evenly. “To others too. But what makes it special is the iron, nothing else.”

“The ancients knew iron was sacred before they gave it a name,” he continued. “Before they were even human. They knew it was part of them and of all living things. The moment they crafted the first iron object, they knew they’d found the metal of the gods. Do you understand that?”

“No,” he gurgled. His strength was leaving him along with his body fluids. He didn’t see the blow coming. It smashed his mouth and knocked out several teeth, filling his mouth with blood.

“What’s it taste of?” the man said.

He choked on it, and tried to turn onto his side to spit out the blood and saliva.

“Metal,” he croaked.

“What kind of metal?”

“Iron,” he whispered.

“Exactly. Iron. Blood tastes of iron, iron tastes of blood.” His voice became dreamy.

“Just picture our predecessors. How well they knew the smell and taste of iron. From the blood of animals and the humans they sacrificed, from the

monthly cycle of women.

They revered blood because they knew it meant life, it meant food for humans and gods alike, and it meant the birth of new children. And when, one day, they beat out the first iron, when they licked it, they knew they’d found the metal of the gods, they’d divined the secret of life and death. Then of course they forgot. But forgetting is a human characteristic and gods are inclined to forgive when they’re in a generous mood.”

The man on the rock heard the other get up and move away. His voice came from a distance:

“Have you seen a water spring with a high content of iron? Iron in water is heavy and sits on leaves and branches, on stones. The colour is rusty and it smells a bit like blood.

You can imagine how the ancients were afraid of coming near the spring, its smell, the feeling that something was behind them, an enemy, a predator. A god.”

The man on the rock said nothing. He looked at the stars and trembled, and wondered why he felt so very cold and why there was the splash of water. He felt a terrible sadness.

Then he heard a whisper in his ear: “She’s thirsty. It’s been a long time since She last drank. But I’m ready to deny Her this feast, make Her wait, and take you to a place where you’ll be helped. Your wounds aren’t as bad as you think. Do you want to live?”

“Yes!” the man moaned.

“Okey-dokey. Then tell me where it is, and I’ll take you away from here.”

“I don’t know!”

“But you said you knew. You’ve written about The Knowledge. We came here at the appointed time. You insisted it were just you and me, without the others. Now you have to tell me.”

Whatever he said would only make it worse.

“If you didn’t believe in what you preached yourself, you wouldn’t have come here. Right?”

He couldn’t answer this. Until yesterday, he thought he believed.

“Right?” the man shrieked and plunged the knife into his stomach. He nearly passed out this time from the pain. His intestines were punctured.

“Stop! I lied!”

V



## Mihail VESHIM

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

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

Some of his more significant publications include:

- 1990 – *Nottingham Forest* – a short story collection
- 1991 – *The Austrians Are Coming* – a short story collection
- 1992 – *Then and Now* – a Sicilian parody novel
- 1996 – *Bay Ganyo Returns 101 Years Later* – in collaboration with Yordan Popov and Krastyo Krastev
- 1998 – *The Three Musketeers* – a short story collection
- 1999 – *Letters from Nashington* – satirical essays
- 2000 – *Comet to the Land of Arda* – satirical essays
- 2004 – *End of Quote* – literary parodies
- 2008 – *The English Neighbour* – novel
- 2008 – *Laughter in the Courtroom* – three satirical novelettes
- 2009 – *Old Hippies* – a short story collection

- 2010 – *Nashington* – novel
- 2011 – *The Lord of the Wasps* – collection of humorous short stories
- 2013 – *The Russian Neighbour* – novel
- 2014 – *When I Was a Sea Captain* – humorous short story collection
- 2014 – *Take Me Home* – a children's short novel
- 2015 – *Tequila Sunrise* – a short story collection

The mini-series *The English Neighbour* was produced by Bulgarian National Television, based on Veshim's novel of the same name, directed by Docho Bodzhakov and starring the English actor Leslie Grantham.

The comedy *Agnes*, based on his novel *Nashington*, was performed for several seasons at Sofia Theatre, directed by Sunny Saninski.

He has been awarded numerous national prizes, including: Chudomir Award – National Humorous Short Story Award, 1996

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

Rayko Alexiev Award – Award for comprehensive satirical work, 2008

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

His novel *The English Neighbour* was among the ten books nominated for the Literary Award of the European Parliament – 2008.

Some of his short stories, feuilletons and magazine columns have been translated into Russian, Serbian, Polish, German, English, Mongolian, Vietnamese and other languages, to bring laughter to other countries and peoples.



## THE ENGLISH NEIGHBOUR

*Synopsis*

The village of Fecundity, somewhere in Bulgaria. There, the inhabitants are people in the prime of life, yet their desire to work is on the wane. They don't want to earn a windfall from their land, but from the lottery. That's why their tomatoes are from Turkey, their carrots are Macedonian, and their brandy is Scottish... Scottish brandy is served at London, the local bar, where Nottingham Forest – a pure-blooded Bulgarian named after an English team – is a regular. Every day the novel's other characters drop by the bar – the Mayor, the Skinhead, Dencho, the principal of the closed-down school,

as well as Shturbanov, a former colonel from the special forces, now retired. The drinks are served up by the beautiful Gloria, who has a dream – of becoming a pop-folk singer and leaving the village, which is too small for her dreams and her bust size.

...One fine day, John arrives in Fecundity, a genuine Englishman from Manchester who has bought a house. After the house, he buys a tractor to plow up the village's weed-covered fields. While he buzzes around on his tractor, other ideas buzz through the heads of his fellow villagers – local and global scams and schemes.

How does it happen that in a short while the Queen's loyal subject is changed down to his very core? He folds his Guardian newspaper into a hat, starts cursing the British parliament and badmouthing the monarchy. He starts to resemble his Bulgarian neighbors so much that they proudly pat him on the back: "Hey now, Johnny, we made a real Bulgarian out of you!"

All of this in MihaelVeshim's novel "The English Neighbor." A Bulgarian story to be read in one fell swoop and with a smile.

## The English Neighbor

*Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel*

A frantic squeal came from the garden next door. The two would-be executioners were wrestling with poor Ronaldo, trying to hold him still enough to stab properly.

"Bloody Hell! He even kicks like Ronaldo," Nottingham shouted, having received a swift trotter right on his knee.

"Well, you named him after a footballer, bastard!" said the shaved head, as he struggled to pin the pig to the ground.

"Hold it tight! Ouch!" Nottingham yelled. "Right, that's it! This pig has got to die!"

Amidst squeals and swearing the pig and the two men rolled around furiously on the ground. Patricia, a model of English respectability, stood staring at them in horror. The sight immediately dispelled any thought of leaving...

"John, do something!" she cried. "They're killing it!"

John felt rather like a UN peacekeeper, but he had no idea how to intervene in such a regional conflict.

"Quickly, John!" his wife screamed at him. "Stop this barbarity!"

John dashed through the gate into the garden next door. He grabbed the two men by their collars and pulled them off their prey. The prey in question sprang to his feet and made a dash for freedom. But the rope attached to his back leg held him fast to the door of the sty.

"What the hell do you want?" gasped Nottingham, still brandishing the knife. "Why are you interfering?"

"Stop! Mustn't kill," said John, pointing at the pig.

"OK I'll just leave it to die a natural death then!" snapped the owner, heading, threateningly, for the tethered animal.

Suddenly John had a flash of inspiration:

"Wants to buy! Wants to buy a pig! Ronaldo."

The manager, Nottingham Forest, immediately announced the fee: "You want a transfer? Give me three hundred Euros!"

Without bargaining the Englishman reached for his wallet.

"Stop!" said the Skinhead. "Tell him five hundred! This is Ronaldo."

"You said three hundred! Finish," said John, starting to count out the cash.

"Well OK, he's yours!" agreed Nottingham, putting the knife down and

offering his hand. "Deal!"

He stroked the Euros on his chin: "That'll do nicely". He looked at the pig. "Take him and don't forget to feed him."

John turned towards the fence, to where his wife was watching: "Patricia we have a pig."

"No John!" she replied, waving her arms. "Let's take it to the zoo..."

John translated her words into Bulgarian.

"What zoo?" asked an astonished Nottingham. "There used to be one in the town but it closed down ages ago... They ate all the animals at the start of the transition."

"Shut up!" said the Skinhead, digging Nottingham sharply in the ribs. "The town zoo is open again. The boss is a mate of mine. He'll make the pig feel like he's in a five-star hotel."

"That'll do nicely," said John, relieved that the matter had been settled without bloodshed. Now he could return to his garden like a triumphant peacekeeper.

"You were magnificent, darling!" said Patricia, hugging him and forgiving him everything. She pointed at the Skinhead in the garden next door:

"What a nice boy... I'd like him to be my Bulgarian teacher. You have a pupil, I'll have a teacher!"

The Skinhead caught the word "teacher":

"I think this woman is getting the Teacher's out! Let's get Shturbanov's pickup and get this pig sorted."

Half an hour later Ronaldo was in the back of the pickup. The pig, with his natural intelligence, knew he wasn't heading for a five-star hotel and was grunting anxiously...

"Calm down, Ronaldo," said the Skinhead, "I've spoken to the guy and you'll have your own sty!"

"Farewell, Ronaldo!" said Nottingham, his eyes watering.

The Skinhead sat behind the wheel and Patricia and John waved as the pickup sped off.



## Emanuil A. VIDINSKY

was born in 1978. He graduated from 91<sup>st</sup> German-language high school in Sofia and holds degrees in Slavic and Germanic literatures from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski." His short story "October 4" won the 2004 national "Rashko Sugarev" award, while another story, "Egon and the Silence," won second place at the 2009 short fiction competition organized by Balkani publishing house and United Bulgarian Bank (first prize was not awarded). He is the author of two collections of short stories, *Cartographies of Escape* (Stigmati, 2005) and *Egon and the Silence* (Janet 45, 2008), a novel *Places for Breathing* (Altera, 2008) and a book of poems *Par Avion* (Janet 45, 2011). Vidinski was a co-founder of the humanities seminar "Corner," focusing on the work of Tchavdar Mutafov, Thomas Mann and Feodor Dostoyevsky (2003-4), editor of the music section of *Literary Newspaper* (2005-6), as well as founder and editor of the book series "World Novels" at Altera publishing house (2007-10). Between 2008 and 2012, he worked as an editor at the Bulgarian section of Deutsche Welle, in Bonn (Germany). Since 2013, Vidinski has been serving as the editor-in-chief of Panorama Magazine.

Aside from literature, Emanuil A. Vidinski is a musician. In the spring of 2013, together with the poet Petar Tchouhov, he founded the band Par Avion Band, which performs mostly original songs. The band's first single appeared in the summer of 2014.

## EGON AND THE SILENCE

### Synopsis

In this collection of short stories Emanuil A. Vidinski is still interested in crises and catastrophes, in seemingly minor oddities that suddenly reveal formidable craters.

One of the highlights here, *Layla and Haled* is a work unusual of contemporary Bulgarian fiction. It is a novella, a genre little used today – for reasons unknown, as this genre, while not broad and vast as the novel, is much more generous than the short story in permitting the reader to live for a while in its fictional world. *Layla and Haled* is set in a different culture and developed without any spicy exoticism and false notes. Its main characters, Layla and Haled, are Tunisian immigrants that have come to live in Bonn propelled by their impossible love. They are able to adapt much better in a completely different society because the obedience required by social and familial dogmas has been, in effect, robbing their lives. Understandably, in its depth the novella is about the narrator's urge to know the Other, to perceive and empathize. It is worth noting how the narration easily achieves its dynamic, shifting between different methods in presenting the bits and pieces of the couple's story: direct dialogue, reported speech, or e-mails.

The short story *A Farewell Letter* is overwhelmed by the Nothingness of being and love, which are in the end the same thing; the one-page long *The Tiniest, Perhaps, Street in Sofia* presents a multitude of stories, each of them only suggested before another one displaces it. In this way, the reader's imagination is powerfully stimulated to develop on its own these beginnings of stories; and, as they are obviously personal, the reader is really called on to walk into the narrator's shoes and see in his frames moments of his own life.

*Morten* draws the reader within the madness of a certainly intriguing character who unexpectedly leaves his wife, his home and his whole life to lock himself in a flat and cover its walls with maps of various cities, thus fancifully "traveling" around the world. *Lilly* is centered on what is perhaps the most charismatic female character in the book. In *Egon and the Silence* the protagonist is not so much the human Egon but silence itself ("This is another kind of silence, Egon thinks, sipping from his lemonade. A silence that does not stalk. I am not afraid of it. It is moving and not dumb.") *A Sea of Doves* is a typical urban impression in late summer. *A Buffalo Heart* is a story involving a middle-aged woman and a Roma kid. The woman takes an instant liking for the

kid, she imagines washing his cheeks, filthy from the street dust, then kissing him and sending him home. This is a story about loneliness and the ease which sometimes allows us to bridge the gap between social and ethnic strata.

Vidinski's writing remains literary, yet in a way that is not ostentatious. His writing style is one that *reads*. It remains alien to boisterous improvisation and copying genre schemes alike. His book can have certain requirements of its readers, yet exercises them in a very delicate way.



## Morten or The Cartography of Escape

Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel

**M**orten received the first map one Sunday morning. His neighbor to the left brought it to him. The postman had given it to her. "You need to put up a nameplate. Otherwise things might get lost."

Morten thanked her and took the envelope. He had ordered a total of ten maps of various cities. He tore open the envelope impatiently. The first was from Buenaventura. Brand new. It had a fresh smell. He went over to the bed and spread it out. First, he looked at it from a distance, to get a general sense

of the landscape.

The red lines of the boulevards, the jumbled geometrical shapes of the individual neighborhoods. He savored every little corner, without being able to make anything out. He sat like that for a minute or two. Then he moved in closely and started studying the map inch by inch. He traversed it from top to bottom and after several hours had mentally noted the house, the restaurants and all the places his main character would visit.

At around two in the afternoon, Morten tossed out the cold coffee and

made himself a new pot. He lazily settled back into the armchair in front of the window which looked out over the building's inner courtyard. There had once been a fountain in the middle of the little square, but someone had gotten rid of it and left a stone slab in its place.

He had rented the apartment a week ago. It was small, but surrounded by windows. And Morten needed a lot of light. There was a bookshop nearby, and a grocery store. The tram stop was about a three-minute walk away, so human traffic by the building wasn't much of a problem. That was enough for him.

In the evening Morten wrote his name on a sheet of paper from his ledger and went down to paste it on the mailbox. He hesitated, wondering whether he should use his real name, but decided that such games only created complications. Besides, it was unlikely any of his acquaintances would look him up in this neighborhood. It was practically impossible.

So he calmly wrote "Morten Brian Nielsen," added "writer" with a smile and pasted up the little slip of paper. He wished he could've avoided it entirely, but since the mail would be his only tie to the world, there was no getting around it.

The two rooms Morten inhabited were scantily furnished. In the bedroom there was a large bed, a wardrobe and green curtains. In the living room, where he wrote, there was a brown desk with numerous drawers, with a computer in one corner, a pack of 20 blank CDs, an ashtray and a lamp.

There was an armchair across from the window that looked onto the inner courtyard, more green curtains and a bookshelf. The walls of the rooms were bare except for the bathroom, where there was a mirror. There was no table in the kitchen, just a sink and a large refrigerator, on top of which Morten kept two plates, a coffee cup, glass tumblers for alcohol and silverware. That was all.

Before going to bed, he picked up the map and taped it to the wall above the desk. He looked at it for a few minutes before falling asleep with a hint of impatience in his eyes.

In the morning, Morten drank coffee and went out for a stroll. He only came back when he was sure the postman had already made his rounds. Indeed, in the mailbox were two envelopes addressed to him. He opened the first one on his way up the stairs. It was a map of Valparaiso. He took his time with the second. He decided to leave it for later. He began studying the city. First, he stepped back, looked at the tangle of streets, houses and green spaces, after which he began to examine them up close, kneading his lips anxiously.

In the evening he taped the map up next to the other one and opened the

second envelope. This time it was Comodoro Rivadavia. Those were the three Latin American cities from which Morten had ordered maps. He repeated the inspection in exactly the same way. Everything took a lot of time and that night the nerve endings in his temples finally relaxed around four o'clock in the morning.

Tuesday began badly. Morten woke up around noon, with circles under his eyes and a slight sensitivity to light. He lay there for a few minutes before he drew aside the green curtains, blinking. The sun stung his pupils, but he closed his eyelids and, opening them gradually, managed to adjust.

This time there was no need to go out, the postman had surely already come. The neighbor to his left popped up on the steps in front of him, expressing her approval that he had put up a nameplate. In response, he gave a friendly nod, apologized for inconveniencing her on Sunday and continued down the stairs. But the mailbox was empty.

Upon returning to his apartment, Morten turned on his computer and, furious, began to write a letter to the company he had ordered the maps through, but then he thought better of it and deleted the message. After all, nothing had really happened. To calm himself, he opened his ledger and busied himself with creating a plan. He listed the names Buenaventura, Valparaiso and Comodoro Rivadavia one beneath the other and across from each one noted various streets, restaurants, hotels, cafes and other details. He kept writing until almost five in the afternoon, at which point he went to the kitchen and poured himself a large glass of cognac. He sat down in the armchair and stayed there until late in the evening.

The next day, a large map of the world arrived. Morten immediately put it up on the wall and, drinking his coffee standing, began examining it. He took three big red pushpins out of one of the desk drawers and stuck them over the names of the three cities. Now calmer, he once again took up the plan and worked on it for several hours. Then he put on his jacket and went out to stretch his legs a bit.

He already had the basic outline in his head. He had thought it up long ago, when he was still living there, on the other side of the canal. One morning, while she was setting the table for breakfast and he was making coffee, Monica had told him that some close friends of theirs had just left for vacation in Cuba. "I feel like going somewhere, too, Morten. What do you say?"

# W



## Angel WAGENSTEIN

Angel Raymond Wagenstein was born in 1922 in the city of Plovdiv, in the family of a Jewish craftsman. He spent his early years in France where his parents had emigrated because of political persecution.

After an amnesty, the family returned to Sofia, where Angel Wagenstein graduated from a technical school of construction. While at school, he participated actively in the activities of the Workers Youth Union, prohibited by the authorities. After Bulgaria entered the war on the side of Nazi Germany, he was in charge of a sabotage group which in the winter of 1941/42 set on fire a large German warehouse filled with sheep-skin jackets before they were shipped to the Moscow front. The group remained undetected by the police.

By virtue of the antisemitic laws he was sent to a forced labour camp for Jews, but escaped from there and joined the armed opposition movement as member of the staff of the partisan detachment active in the south-west of Bulgaria.

He was betrayed in the course of an incursion and was tortured mercilessly, then received the death penalty. His life was spared by the speedy entrance of the Soviet Army into Bulgaria.

Immediately after his release from prison he volunteered for the front in Yugoslavia and Hungary as one of the managers of the Bulgarian front-line theatre.

After the war he studied cinema dramaturgy at the Moscow Film Academy. He wrote the scripts for over 50 feature films,

documentaries and cartoons made in Bulgaria, Germany, Russia, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Hungary, Georgia, China and Vietnam. His plays for grown-ups and children were staged in Bulgaria, Romania, Russia and Spain. Films made from his scripts won a number of significant national and international awards, including the Special Award of the Jury in Cannes for the film *Stars*, telling about the deportation of Jews from Southern Thrace (1959, director Konrad Wolf).

He is a long-time contributor as script writer and director to ARD (Sender Freies Berlin - SFB and WDR- Köln); among other films he made for them is the documentary series *One Bullet and Three Grains of Rice* about the war in Vietnam.

He has twice won the Dimitrov Award for Art, and also the GDR National Award.

His feature trilogy about the fate of European Jews during the 20th century and the Holocaust years, consisting of the novels *Isaac's Torah*, *Farewell, Shanghai* and *Far from Toledo* (*Abraham the Drunkard* in the French and Italian editions) was translated into French, English (USA, Canada and Australia), German, Italian Spanish (Spain and Latin America), Russian, Macedonian, Polish, Czech and Hebrew. A Chinese translation is being prepared.

In 2011 the book *Before the End of the World* was published. This is a novel of a life crucified between laughter and sadness, hopes and collapses, ups and downs. The author shares his cherished memories of the Neolithic era – a world full of loyalty and betrayal, violence and light impulses. Feel free to browse the unknown pages of resistance about the paradoxes of time and entertaining episodes from behind the scenes of cinema.

*A Dream about St. Boris I* (2015) is written in a language inspired by both the original historical sources and contemporary literary Bulgarian, which gives it the special and original twang of an ancient chronicle. The text was adapted into a feature film named *Boris I* with the participation of Professor Stefan Danailov in the role of the great Bulgarian ruler.

For his literary works, Angel Wagenstein was awarded the

Jean Monet European Prize for Literature (2004), several annual awards from the Union of Bulgarian Writers, the awards of the Sorbonne Prix Alberto-Benveniste, of the Union of French Booksellers, and the ADEI-WIZO Italian Literary Award. He received extensive reviews in the major newspapers and literary publications of Europe and America.

Angel Wagenstein is one of the twelve intellectuals – dissidents and reformers – who were invited by French President Francois Mitterrand to the historic closed-door breakfast in Sofia in January 1989. He was awarded the high distinction of Chevalier of the French Order of Merit for his participation in the struggle against fascism and totalitarianism. Later the French Government made him Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Literature. He was a deputy in the 7th Great National Assembly in 1990, which adopted the new democratic Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria. He was awarded the highest Bulgarian distinction, the Order of Stara Planina 1st degree, and recently was awarded honorary prizes for life-long achievement and contribution to the development of Bulgarian cinema and Bulgarian television. He is an Honorary Citizen of the city of Plovdiv.

In September 2011 the Ambassador of Spain to Bulgaria handed over to Angel Wagenstein on behalf of the Kingdom of Spain and the Sepharad communities a silver plaque with the inscription: To Angel Wagenstein – forger of worlds and words, as a token of recognition for a life dedicated to creativity and to honor the road travelled by his ancestors from far-away Toledo to Plovdiv.



## FAREWELL, SHANGHAI

### *Synopsis*

Moving effortlessly from Paris to Dresden to Shanghai, Wagenstein (Isaac's Torah) masterfully chronicles the lives of European émigrés and refugees in WWII Shanghai. The cast of this ensemble novel is large. Elisabeth and Theodore Weissberg, a German mezzo-soprano and her German-Jewish virtuoso violinist husband, flee Dresden to eke out an existence in Shanghai's burgeoning Jewish ghetto, which ends up 30,000 strong as the Shoah begins. Hilde Braun, a German-Jewish actress, is living illegally in Paris aided by a mysterious Slav named Vladek, until

events force them, separately, to Shanghai. Istvan Keleti, a homosexual Hungarian musician and drug-user, and Gertrude von Dammbach, a former call-girl-turned-baroness, are also among the persecuted and displaced, some of whom work with the Resistance to undermine Hitler. Wagenstein is impressive in his ability to move from the small details of individual displaced lives to a larger panorama of international intrigue: there's a telling subplot about tensions between the Japanese, who occupy Shanghai, and the Germans, with whom they've formed an uneasy alliance; another revealing thread concerns the loyalties of Chinese Catholic nuns. Wagenstein brings to life a largely unknown chapter of Nazi persecution.

Rights sold in: France (Galaade; 10/18), Germany (Random House), Italy (Baldini Dalai Castoldi), Macedonia (Makabej), Spain (Libros del Asteroide), USA (Other press), Izrael (Kinneret Zmora-Bitan Dvir), Poland (Zysk i s-ka wydawnictwo).

# Farewell, Shanghai

*Excerpt / Translated by Elizabeth Frank and Deliana Simeonova*

IT WAS EARLY IN the evening of November 10, 1938. The concert in the great hall had begun. The mild light of the crystal chandeliers, dimmed as far as possible, only intensified the bright sparkling flames of the candles attached to the solid red mahogany music stands. Theodore Weissberg was in an immaculate tuxedo – in fact, as is correct at such concerts, all the other members of the Dresden Philharmonic were in tuxedos as well.

Dressed in formal evening clothes, the audience in both the orchestra seats and the boxes was holding its breath. This symphony No 45 in F sharp minor is rarely performed, and it had not been easy to get tickets.

On this particular evening, four SS officers had installed themselves in the center box, where long before the Weimar Republic, in the time of the iron chancellor, *furst* Otto von Schonhausen, a.k.a. Bismarck, the Hohenzollerns and their entourage used to sit. In the audience's eyes, it was an important sign of the profound changes that had taken place in Germany. The highest-ranking among the officers was Hauptsturmfuhrer Lothar Hassler, a very handsome man, blond and blue-eyed, as if it he'd been cut out from one of the torn posters left over from the Berlin Olympics and still hanging on city walls of the all-conquering Aryan nation. Something about him recalled the masculine, Viking-warrior-type profiles of Leni Riefenstahl's film characters.

The most junior officer, possibly an aide-de-camp or something of that kind, tilted toward Hassler, obligingly offering the open program.

"Allegro assai. I think it means 'rather jolly.'"

"I hope so," Hassler murmured gloomily. "Tonight I hope it will be 'rather jolly.'"

He knew what he was talking about, the Hauptsturmfuhrer; he spoke little, but he always had the exact word for the exact thing.

While the Haydn symphony was pouring out its light and tender "farewell", the last of the naive was also saying "farewell" to their comfortable illusions about good old Germany – this winter's tale that, in just a few weeks or so, would kick out like dirty kittens the Nazi bums who had just by chance grabbed hold of power.

For it was on exactly this night – the evening of November 10, 1938,

Wednesday going on Thursday, that history would bestow the name *Krystallnacht* – "The Night of Broken Glass", and this referred not to the crystal chandeliers of the Dresden Konzerthaus, but to the crystal tinkling of broken Jewish shop windows.

Jolly fellows, bloated with beer, were smashing shop windows all over Germany and Austria, which, to the unparalleled enthusiasm of the local population, had recently been annexed. Broken glass windows, under stomping boots, clinked and crunched during this jolly crystal night.

Terrified old Jews hauled out of their beds, were being dragged down the streets with cardboard signs hung on their chests: JUDE.

Synagogues were burning – Fasanenstrasse and Oranienburgerstrasse in Berlin, above Schwedenplatz in Vienna, and in Leipzig, Munich, Frankfurt, and Stuttgart. All through that November night of elegant concerts burned another two hundred synagogues.

*Allegro assai* – rather jolly!

Lothar Hassler lifted the small opera glasses to his eyes. His gaze swept across the hushed audience and, coming to rest at the box just opposite, lingered on the face of a young woman with golden-copper hair softly illuminated by the barely flickering chandeliers. This was the mezzo-soprano Elisabeth Muller-Weissberg, famous not only in Germany but also on the stages of Carnegie Hall and wife of the violinist to whom in a moment the bright circles of the opera glasses now shifted.

They remained on him for a long time while the officer examined with curiosity this world-renowned celebrity, a member of the Prussian Academy of Arts while along the Hauptstrasse there flowed an improvised evening procession by torchlight. The crowd was singing merrily, and at the front, in time to the song, drums were booming:

*Auf der Heide blut en Blu-melein*

*Ein! Zwei!*

*Und das heist E-e-rika....*

Exactly there, at the corner, where you could find the famous bookstore Meersohn & Sons, some gay blade came up with the idea of making a bonfire out of the books. Marx, Heine, Freud, Feuchtwanger, Srefan Zweig, Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Bertolt Brecht and Anna Seghers, Friedrich Wolf and

Leonhard Frank, Baruch Spinoza and Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka and Henri Bergson, all made excellent kindling. Einstein with his quantum structure of radiation threw off a spray of sparks, flying afterward above the flames with his covers spread like wings.

Don't think that these pork butchers and *lumpen* sots have any idea who you are, Albert. We know – we know very well. Maybe over there, where you managed to slip away just in the nick of time, you might feel sad about what's happening in your former motherland, but we feel cheerful – after all, you yourself say that everything is relative. We're working according to your Jewish formula, Alberto, sorry, but excuse us! Our Energy to smash your equals the Masses that support us, multiplied by the Speed of Light squared, with which we will conquer the world. This is the situation, dear Albert, so farewell! It's time now to find out at last who are the real masters of Germany – the Jews or us!

$E = mc^2$  fell right into the center of the galaxy of fire and shot out a myriad of mirthful sparks.

2

Two orchestra players, the oboist and hornplayer, collected their scores, blew out their candles, and silently left the stage, this being the ritual whenever Haydn's "Farewell" Symphony is performed. But much to their surprise, waiting for them in the wings, were some uniformed stormtroopers, who unceremoniously grabbed the musicians and pulled them outside. The two naturally tried to resist and find out what was going on but some big-shot superior officer with stretched-out breeches and shiny boots put a finger to his smiling lips: *shhh*, quiet now, don't disturb the concert! And there was no malice in his expression – only a kindhearted, almost friendly look. After all, dear friends, as you yourself understand, this isn't some madhouse of a Jewish synagogue, but a classy concert hall, so let's have, as people say, mutual respect!

Theodore Weissberg, without lifting his bow from the strings, saw through the flames of the candles how, backstage, the brown-shirted thugs were dragging away the two musicians, and threw a confused look at the next violin.

Other musicians had also noticed what was going on, because a slight, almost imperceptible movement, shivered through the orchestra. Even so, the concert continued.

For the contrabass and the violoncello, it was their turn now.

[...]



## Virginia ZAHARIEVA

was born in Sofia on September 2, 1959. She is a writer, psychotherapist and the mother of one son, Rouben. Literary critics have labeled her a brilliant representative of Bulgarian *écriture féminine*. Her poetry is as expressive, temperamental and unexpected as the author herself.

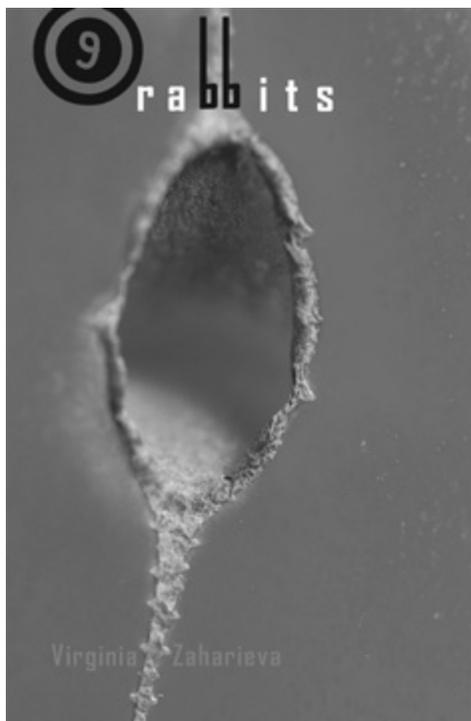
Virginia Zaharieva graduated with degrees in Bulgarian literature and psychology from Sofia University. She later specialized in analytic Neoreichian psychotherapy in Switzerland under Professor Valdo Bernasconi. Her psychotherapy style combines the achievements of western psychotherapy with eastern practices. She is the director of the Bulgarian Institute of Body Psychotherapy.

She is the author of three books of poetry: *The Stone That Does Not Listen to the River* (1989), *The Hen with the Patched Up Eye* (1992) and *Quadrille Later in the Afternoon* (1996). *Virginias* – her latest book is an anthology that brings together four poetic books (Ciela, 2011).

Her novel *Nine Rabbits* (QM, 2008) was nominated for the 2008 Helicon Prize for the best contemporary Bulgarian fiction and was the best-selling Bulgarian book in bookstores for 2008. It was also nominated for the prestigious Edward Vik Literary Prize for the best novel of 2008. Virginia Zaharieva's novel *Nine Rabbits*, translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel, was published in the United Kingdom by Istros Books in September, 2012. It is now forthcoming in the U.S. where it will come out in April, 2014, published by

Black Balloon Publishing.

Virginia Zaharieva is also the author of *The Mercy of Small Mirrors* (Ciela, 2009) – a collection of essays on the culture of living. A book-mirror that reflects the person and his houses, and observes how people communicate, create and love. She has more than 30 years of experience in all genres of journalism. Writing, capturing sounds, researching the psyche, creating performances and installations – these are all part of her activities. She is the editor-in-chief of *P.S.* – the first gender magazine in Bulgaria. She created an audio CD entitled *Bulgarian Natural Sounds* and another CD *The House of Medusa – Sounds for Creating*. The theme of vulnerability as the only portal towards love gave birth to her performance piece entitled *Vulnerability – 5 Motions*, as well as a documentary with the same title. Between 2003 and 2006 she created several installations: *For People and Mirrors*, *For Texts and Metronomes*, *For Text and 2 Toasters*, and *For Text and Tomato Soup*.



### NINE RABBITS

#### Synopsis

The book *Nine Rabbits* tells the story of a six-year-old girl and a 46-year-old woman. Manda, the little girl, grows up during the height of socialism in the 1960s, raised by her tyrannical grandmother. A raw, funny and magical tale about childhood. Through adventures and horror stories, the reader shares the complicated path of a child determined to explore the world. Manda survives the lopsided battle with her grandmother, who is also waging open and covert wars with life, with the eternally absent grandfather, with their youngest children and with the workmen finishing up the family home along the Black Sea coast.

In the second part, 40 years later that same child has become a woman, now living in democratic times and racked by an identity crisis. Manda has swallowed up her tyrannical grandmother, turning that despotism against herself. In the heroine's difficult process of awakening, every shattering of childhood matrices frees up space for spontaneity, creativity and love. The text bristles with insights that strike the heroine as a result of her concrete experiences, come to her in dreams or are overheard in the ringing of Buddhist bells. *Nine Rabbits* is a book about The Way and the fermentation life subjects each of us to. The geographic leaps – Paris, Osaka, Sofia, remote villages, Dominica, Lisbon, Moscow, St. Petersburg and Vienna – merely serve as a pretext for journeys within the heroine's soul. Just as in the first part, the tragic and the comic, the beautiful and the ugly naturally coexist. They accompany Manda's attempts to cope with modern living, with her taste for luxury, love and spiritual growth. Most of the episodes in the second half show the heroine in various emotional conditions and experiencing archetypal processes such as fear, shame, PMS, divorce, marriage, forgiveness, aging, death and finally love and creative work as salvation for a wounded soul.

In the second half, for Manda the world gradually transforms into a Divine Kitchen, where out of a mixture of characters, places, ingredients and situations she creates delicious dishes. The reader is rewarded for all the pain and suffering with dancing, harmony and abundance. While the first half sticks to the classical narrative of the past, the second part captures the pulse of the present. The work is rich in literary genres and forms, containing elements of scripture, diary, memoir, poetry and journalism, which define *Nine Rabbits* as a hybrid novel.

*Nine Rabbits* is a pregnant book – inside it there is another small book containing all 29 recipes found throughout the novel in case readers would like to try them in their own kitchens. In the text itself the recipes are sensory instructions for concrete action – a form of reality that calms and nourishes the furious text as well as the hungry reader.

This is a book about standing up for your own choices.

A handbook for loving yourself. A book about our debt to pleasure.

*Nine Rabbits* is a story about life as wakefulness at every moment.

## Nine Rabbits

*Excerpts / Translated by Angela Rodel*

### Dresses

I appeared in Nesebar – an inconvenient four-year-old grandchild, just when my grandmother was raising the last two of her six children, putting the finishing touches on the house, ordering the workmen around, doing some of the construction work herself and thank God for that, because at least it used up some of her monstrous energy – otherwise who knows would've become of me.

Klement and Maruna – they were the runts of the litter – were rarely at home, since they went to boarding schools in Burgas. My aunt studied agriculture, while my uncle was at the nautical school.

Whenever I disappeared for long stretches somewhere inside the house, you could bet that I was in the attic, where there were a dozen big chests full of shoes, dresses and all sorts of things brought from Czechoslovakia, where the family had prospered. Grandma Nikula and Grandpa Boris – “the Czechs,” as they were called – had worked in glass factories in Bohemia between 1948 and 1958 – right during the most optimistic years of the Klement Gottwald regime.

Nikula had an eye for materials and colors. Her father had been a cloth trader. In Czechoslovakia she had sewn dresses for herself and her daughters and even managed to marry off her oldest girl in Prague at the age of eighteen.

Nikula truly did dress with taste – although now only when we went to the movies or when she stumped for the Fatherland Front in the nearby villages.

She took me with her, where could she leave me? I stood in front of the podium and watched her. She was very beautiful and convincing, my grandmother, when she got up in front of the masses. I was proud of her: she always managed to slip in something from her own heroic biography that made her speech entertaining. For example, how when she was eight months pregnant with my uncle she helped build the Hainboaz Pass and was a shock-worker despite her huge belly.

Now, absorbed in building the house, she didn't have the time or occasion to parade around in her dresses. So they all belonged to me.

The attic was plastered with a mixture of sheep manure, fine straw and dark red clay. A whiff of dingleberries and dust accompanied my odysseys through 1950s fashion in front of a large cracked mirror, lit up by the one skylight in

the roof. I first put on a black satin slip with lace trim. Then I added white silk petticoats. Next came the colorful flowered dresses, tailored at the waist, flared at the bottom, with straps, backless or with plunging necklines. Trembling, I would try them on one by one. The shoes had solid heels, open backs and another little opening at the tip of the toes. I climbed up onto the high heels. I was beautiful. Thus dolled up, I would spend hours enraptured by the family treasures. Once I even found a

pistol. I showed it to Rufi, my friend from next door, and then hid it again in a different spot. Grandma and grandpa fought a lot and I was afraid that they'd end up shooting each other some evening.

I shared the attic with giant nesting seagulls who yielded their territory to me with a squawk. At that time I hadn't yet seemed Hitchcock's *The Birds* and so I studied the eggs in the nest without a thought for the mother lurking outside. During some important surveillance mission, I would hear my grandma's raspy voice: “Where are you, girl... Saraaa, Pepaaa, Marunaaa, Klemooo, Ivaaan, Veraaa...” And then, once she'd finished reeling off the names of her children, completely furious, she'd hit upon my name and bark, “Mandaaaa, Imgonnatanyerhide, get down from there this instaaaant...” Sometimes I thought my name was Imgonnatanyerhide ... “How many times have I told you not to rummage around in the attic,” her voice echoed in the shaft leading to the attic. It was a difficult place to climb up to. I counted on this while hiding among the chests, but sometimes she was so mad that she'd climb up the ladder huffing and puffing. A wild chase around the rafters in the attic would ensue. “You little turd!” and “brat!” were her war cries. At first it was fun, but the fun soon ended. She would beat me with whatever was at hand – a belt, a hanger or an umbrella – and then she'd collapse exhausted onto some heap of clothing while I quickly escaped outside. I would come back late hoping she would be asleep, but she would be lurking by the door to smack me again. This time for good night.

# Z



## Vladimir ZAREV

was born in Sofia in 1947. His first novel, *The Day of Impatience*, appeared in 1975, and three years later was translated into Russian with a print-run of one million. He is the author of eleven novels, the most popular being *Ruin*, which tells of the dramatic changes Bulgaria experienced after the fall of the Berlin Wall. After *Ruin* was published in German in 2006 by Kiepenheuer & Witsch, German media dubbed Zarev “the Bulgarian Balzac,” while the novel has enjoyed numerous reviews in prestigious publications including *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Berliner Zeitung*, *Die Zeit*, *Neue Zuercher Zeitung*, and *Stern*. *Ruin* was among the five books nominated for the Book Prize for European Understanding at the Leipzig Book Fair. *Ruin* is now being developed into a feature film which will begin shooting in 2014. Zarev has also enjoyed enormous success in Bulgaria and abroad with his family-historical trilogy. The first two volumes, *Genesis* (1978) and *Exodus* (1983) were reprinted several times before the third volume *The Law* appeared. A popular Bulgarian television series is currently based on the trilogy, which was also translated into German and published by the Deuticke in Vienna, a subsidiary of the large publishing house Hanser. *Genesis* was nominated for the prestigious Berliner Brücker prize. In 2013, the Munich-based publisher DTV (Deutsches Taschenbuch Verlag) purchased the rights to the trilogy and in 2014 will release a soft-cover version on the German market. Zarev’s trilogy

has been praised in more than forty reviews in *Der Standard*, *Die Presse*, *Die Zeit*, *Die Welt*, *Zuercher Tagesanzeiger*, and *Wiener Zeitung*, where Zarev was compared to the literary giants Thomas Mann, Dostoyevsky, Marquez and Bulgakov. German national television ZDF filmed an hour-long film about Vladimir Zarev, which has been broadcast numerous times as part of its cultural series “Foenix.”

### RUIN

#### Synopsis

*Ruin* is a novel about the economic, social and spiritual destruction Bulgaria suffered during the turbulent “Transition” from communism to democracy – a period marked by lawlessness, mafia rule, ostentatious displays of wealth by the new “capitalists,” and grinding poverty for most Bulgarians. In the early 1990s, Martin Sestrimsky, a middle-aged novelist, finds himself reduced to physical and creative impotence. Although never an enthusiastic supporter of the communist regime, like most Bulgarian intellectuals Martin nevertheless enjoyed the systems’ perks – a steady paycheck, large print-runs, and an admiring audience. After the regime’s fall in 1989 – engineered by a party-internal coup in which former secret-service agents teamed up with athlete-turned-thugs to “privatize” the country and become its new mafia/capitalists – Martin finds himself in despair: terminally unemployed, unable to write, he is slipping into alcoholism. His family has unraveled along with his career: his wife Veronica, a feminist literary theorist who once worshipped him as a creative genius, now openly scorns him – Martin is sure that she is having an affair. He has also lost his two daughters – Mila has disappeared down the rabbit hole of emigration like thousands of young Bulgarians, while his younger daughter Katarina, a difficult child who was born nearly blind, has found her escape in heroin. After she nearly dies of an overdose, Martin takes her to his mother’s villa outside Sofia for weeks, where he watches over her, even tying her to down so she cannot run away as he sleeps, and ultimately saving her from her addiction – and renewing their relationship.

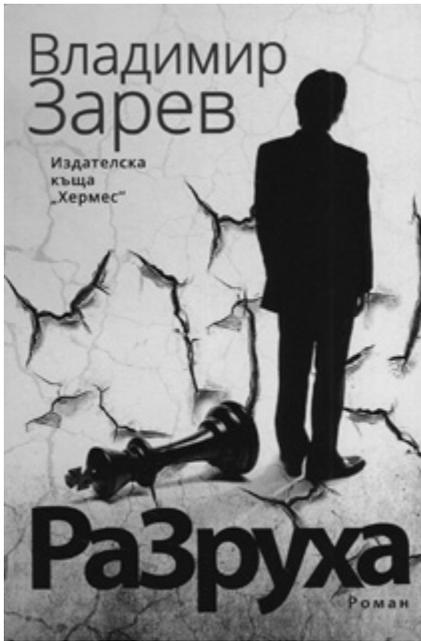
Despite his success with Katarina, Martin’s wry, first-person narrative chronicles his descent into ruin. Feeling ashamed and unmanned by the fact that Veronica is working numerous jobs to make ends meet, Martin decides to pawn his beloved collection of pocket watches. He entrusts them to Borislav –

a professional pawn dealer who seems to have a heart of gold. After Borislav astonishingly does not disappear with the collection and brings Martin far more money than he could have dreamed of for the watches, the two men become be friends as well as business partners of sorts – Martin takes him to other down-and-out intellectuals who have paintings, antiques and other valuables to sell. He also helps Borislav, a former alcoholic, escape the ever-watchful eye of his vulgar chatterbox of a wife, Valya – and as a sign of gratitude Borislav lets Martin in on his eternal get-rich-quick schemes, one of which involves a huge diamond supposedly smuggled into Bulgaria by White Russian émigrés fleeing the October Revolution, which, alas, turns out to be fake. In the end, however, Martin falls victim to the ultimate swindle – having sold his mother’s villa, the last remaining thing of value he owns, to finance yet another of Borislav’s schemes, he eventually comes to realize that he has been conned by the pawn dealer and that he will never see the money again. Sick with grief over the loss of the villa, his mother eventually dies.

Yet Martin’s creative salvation is also woven into this narrative of ruin, in the form of a parallel story detailing how the other half – the Transition’s new elite – lives. After a humiliating visit to see Boyan Tilev, a former-classmate-turned-businessman, to beg for money to publish a book, Martin begins imagining how this newly minted oligarch must have made his millions. After the fall of the regime, Boyan, who was a low-level photographer for the socialist-era secret services, is tapped by a shadowy figure known as the General to take part in the new communist-turned-capitalists’ schemes: smuggling contraband cigarettes, running fuel to Yugoslavia during the embargo, organizing the drug, prostitution and gambling markets, etc. Initially Boyan is mystified as to why he has been singled out for such an opportunity and is petrified as he completes his first deal – accepting a truckload of contraband cigarettes – from the General’s Lebanese business partner. He keeps expecting someone to come and collect the money from the deal, but the General merely offers vague assurances that someday his “cousin” will come to call. As Boyan’s wealth grows, so does his confidence – realizing he has a flair for such scheming, he starts getting into his role as a “businessman” (Bulgarian transition-speak for the mobster-entrepreneurs who privatized the country), building a company and going head-to-head with other would-be oligarchs in Bulgaria’s emerging organized crime networks. Of course, his new role requires a new woman – his devoted, stuttering wife Maria is repulsed by what he has become. As Maria retreats into herself, Boyan grows utterly infatuated with Magdalene, the icy beautiful wife of his grotesque bodyguard, Crook. Boyan hires her as a secretary, and Magdalene

turns out to be as intelligent as she is beautiful – she becomes his right hand and an invaluable advisor, yet she rebuffs all his advances. After driving himself crazy trying to buy her affections, Boyan decides to rape Magdalene in a fit of rage – but at the last moment, he hires a roadside Gypsy prostitute instead and forces Magdalene to watch her give him oral sex. Stunned, Magdalene admits her love for Boyan – and the pair drives to the seaside town of Sozopol to consummate their long pent-up love. Upon returning to Sofia, Boyan gets rid of Crook and unceremoniously sends Maria and their two daughters away, setting up Magdalene as his mistress. Boyan, now with Magdalene by his side, enjoys ever greater success, becoming one of the key mafia kingpins in Bulgaria. At one point, a strange man claiming to be the General’s “cousin” suddenly appears, but Boyan, now overconfident that his success has been due to his own ability and thinking himself untouchable, scornfully sends him away – after all, the General himself has long since died. However, Bulgaria’s wild-west lawlessness is coming to an end; most of the spoils have been divvied up and the quick money that was once so easy to find has become more elusive. Thus, most of the organized crime bosses turn to “legalizing” and laundering their money, establishing themselves as “legitimate” businessmen. Boyan, too, realizes he needs to clean up his business, but against Magdalene’s insistent advice, he joins in one final drug deal with Krassi Dionov, an oafish mobster whom Boyan has collaborated with as well as double-crossed in the past. This single deal proves his undoing, going terribly wrong and costing Boyan his business, his fortune, his home, and ultimately Magdalene – Boyan makes her sleep with the revolting Krassi so he will not take away the apartment where Maria and their daughters live. Alone and despairing, Boyan goes to the seaside town of Sozopol, where he had spent happy early years with Maria and their daughters, and where he and Magdalene had later spent their first days together. Amidst the laughing crowds of young people, he pulls out a gun and opens fire...

Although Boyan’s story at first seems every bit as real as Martin’s, it gradually becomes clear that this narrative is, in fact, the novel that Martin has been struggling for years to write: *Ruin*. Subtle elements from Martin’s life slip into Boyan’s – Borislav and Valya cross his path, as does an antique gun that Martin used to threaten the drug dealer who got his daughter hooked on heroin. And just as Boyan’s life ends in ruins, so does Martin’s: Veronica admits to having an affair and leaves him for her lover, while Katarina abandons him to join her sister in America. Left alone in his empty panel-block apartment, his mother and father dead, swindled out of his villa, Martin nevertheless finds redemption in *Ruin*, a beautifully written novel of the Bulgarian transition.



## Ruin

*Excerpt / Translated by Angela Rodel*

The heat was unbearable. The swelter sucked me in and numbed me, the headstone burned my hand. A pack of dogs crouched nearby. Dulled from hunger and sloth, they were waiting for the funeral to end so they could feast on what family and friends had brought to the graves. Strange looking thanks to accidental interbreeding, these mongrels replayed the whole inexplicability of nature. With elongated snouts and short legs, with guilty eyes and shapeless ears, ugly and sunk in the general misery, they fed on human grief. The sun lit up the crushing desolation of the Malashevtsi Cemetery, the crestfallen weeping willows, the dilapidated benches and lamps, the headstones with their photos pried out, the plastic cups and paper scattered by the wind, the endless rubbish of this final resting place, which, rather than solemnity and peace, emanated only exhaustion. The two priests chanted at cross-purposes, sweating beneath their faded cassocks. I got the feeling that mom, too, was sweating in her formal suit, which she hadn't worn in ten years, since she had nowhere to go in it except to her final rest. The drapery in her plywood coffin was askew, her make-up had gotten smeared, and she had the unhappy look of a person begging to finally be left alone. I struggled to not think, to close myself up in my fear, but I couldn't. I noticed the details, they called to me, seized my attention and forced me to be present.

Our lives seem to consist of details, which we must forget in order to perceive and make sense of them. What we don't forget, we have, in fact, invented ourselves. Life is weighed down by details, forgetfulness and our own fabrications, which we naively call "memories." Human existence is nothing but the anticipation of something happening, which we must then forget, in order to adorn it, to heap it with meanings. Memories are our ultimate fabrication of ourselves, hence our desire to cling to them, to stay within them, while adding something of our own intelligence and sorrow. The rest is biological expiration, our getting lost in time...

The heat was stifling, I felt my bodily fluids coming to a boil under my black suit, moderately thick so that I could wear it in the winter, but also in the summer. I was soaked, if someone had licked me, they would've realized that I was salty, too. I had overdone it with the deodorant, the smell of Gillette mixed with the sluggish sighs, the mawkish scent of the wilting flowers and human fear. I was afraid of mom, of that expression of severity, of irrevocable estrangement, which had taken her away from me forever. I wept for her with abundant perspiration that morning, a morning which was so motionless that every twitch demanded effort, while every effort induced dizziness. I was painfully attached to mom, but I didn't feel grief, because I wasn't sad for myself as well. Every death of a loved one is part of our constant dying. With the end of a beloved person, a part of us perishes as well, a part of our love, our openness and certainty. A void is left, which cannot be filled with anything. Like a board torn out of a fence meant to hide and protect us. While mom withered away in that dump of a hospital – they didn't even have money for sheets and medicine – the details poured out around me. I was forced to think them out. Someone flushed the toilet in the shared bathroom, mom's slippers jutted up absurdly on her feet, but she was already gone. I felt an inhuman loneliness. I looked towards the window, but there was no one there but the sky. The faded sky, threadbare to the point of tearing, crashed down on my shoulders.

I kept thinking and that was what did me in. I didn't dare even sigh, because I had drunk two "Men-Know-Why" beers at Ivana's little bar and yet another at the bus stop in front of the cemetery. My wife leaned towards me and whispered in my sticky ear: "How could you? How could you..."

"How could I what?" I asked.

"You've been drinking."

"I'm sad about mom." I tried to worm my way out.

"You already started in this morning... on today of all days."

“I’m sad about mom,” I repeated, but I wasn’t sad, because I didn’t ache for myself as well. I was afraid of her, of her half-closed eyes, with which she seemed to be watching me, of the waxy arrangement of her fragile body, of the distressing fact that she herself was not there, even when she was right there before my eyes. The stench and indigence of the Malashevtsi Cemetery overtook me, the patience of the street dogs scratching their fleas, all the oppressive details which forced me to transform this moment into a memory. Several of the old women from my mother’s building, her last living friends, were sobbing. They clutched kerchiefs in their gnarled fingers and wiped their eyes, they were crying for themselves. It is edifying to go to graveyards, because only in such a peaceful place can one understand the whole fragility of life, its absurdity, make sense of one’s vanities, the defeat of one’s foolish ambitions. What a fantastic muscle life is, yet what patience must death possess?

## Emerging Writers



**Aleksandar Chobanov**, born in Smolyan in 1979.

2008 – his book of short stories *Collection 18* was published and won the Southern Spring Prize for best debut in the prose category.

2011 – published a short story collection *Summer Afternoon*.

2013 – his first novel, *Kids*, was published.

2015 – his new short story collection *Quantum Garden* will be published.

He has published in various print and on-line editions, including *Capital Light*, *Literary Newspaper*, *Philologist newspaper*, and others.

He graduated in Bulgarian studies from Neofit Rilski Southwestern University in Blagoevgrad.

He earned Master's degrees in creative writing from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and in American and British studies from New Bulgarian University.

He is now a PhD student in new Bulgarian literature at Neofit Rilski Southwestern University in Blagoevgrad.

Since 2010, he has worked as a screenwriter for the television series: "Undercover," seasons 2 and 3; "Fourth Power," season 1; and "Tree of Life," season 2.



**Nadejda Dermendjieva** is a writer, poet and a journalist.

Nadejda was born in 1985 in Sofia. She has a Bachelor's degree in Modern Greek Philology and Masters' degrees in History of Women and Gender Issues, as well as Creative Writing – all obtained from Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”.

Nadejda started her journey in the world of literature by writing poetry and some of her poems were published in *Literaturen vestnik (Literary Newspaper)* in early 2012. However, she decided she was better in fiction and turned to writing short stories. At the end of 2012, one of her stories was published in *Granta Bulgaria* magazine and in May 2013 her first book *With No Pain Killers* was officially born. In 2014 one of her stories - “Clinical Depression” - received the national Rashko Sugarev Award for published stories.

Nadejda's dream had always been to become a profiler and to investigate serial killers. Instead, she became a feminist and a human rights activist. Currently, she is Executive Director of the Bulgarian Fund for Women – a non-profit organization focused on advancing women's rights in Bulgaria. Feminism is her favorite topic in the rare moments she decides to be a journalist.

She believes art is political and wants to make the world a better place – a wish that makes most people think she is crazy. Sometimes she is.

WITH NO PAIN KILLERS is the first book by Nadejda Dermendjieva. It is a compilation of the stories of people who have survived a certain form of violence – domestic violence, rape / incest, homophobic crimes, etc. All stories are based on true events and were inspired when Nadejda worked as a project coordinator at the Bulgarian Fund for Women. Despite the fact that the organization didn't offer any services to victims and didn't have a hotline, still people found its number and called for help.

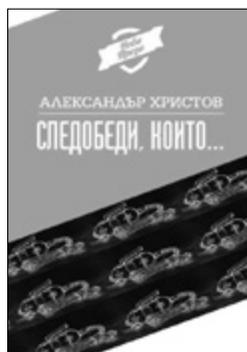


**Zornitsa Garkova** was born in the town of Pernik in 1981. She graduated a local high school in 1999, and Bulgarian philology as her bachelor degree in 2008. In 2012 she did a Master program „Literature – creative writing“ at Sofia university „St. Kliment Ohridski“. Her works have been published in „Stranitsa“ magazine, „Granta Bulgaria“ magazine and in „Literary paper“. In 2013 University publishing house „St. Kliment Ohridski“ published her first collection of short stories „The way of the ants“. She lives and works in Sofia. She writes poems and prose.

#### THE WAY OF THE ANTS

The book „The way of the ants“ is eleven short stories collection. The main theme of the book is death in every sense of this concept – virtual, avoided, deserved death, or even the death caused by occasional circumstances which the character is unable to influence on. There are few other themes among this main one – the political and social situation in Bulgaria today, ecology, and the impossibility of the ordinary person to live in this situation.

A group of young people, put by circumstances and personal choices into a strange cave, in which life and death are reverse, but still their choice is irreversible /“Nine on eight“/, mysterious trip, which ends on The Cliffs of Moher in Ireland /“Cliffs of Moher“/, a tired trolley bus driver, who has forgot something very important, while trying to manage his busy daily routine /“A trolley story“/. „The shell“ is looking for the reasons of the self-kindling wave in Bulgaria, put in intertextual relation with „The Master of the flies“ by William Golding. „The name“ turns back to the times of so-called „Revival process“ in Bulgaria – the process of changing the names from Turkish to Bulgarian ones of the Bulgarian Islamic population. „Tram line №5“ shows Bulgarian political protests from the winter of 2013 and how everything could end if Bulgarian governments keep the line of the indifference to Bulgarian population.



**Aleksandar Hristov** was born in Sofia, Bulgaria in 1986. He graduated from Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” where he studied Bulgarian language and literature. He has a Master’s degree in Creative Writing. He is currently a PhD student at the same university, and also works as a translator of fiction. His short stories have won some of Bulgaria’s national prizes for fiction (including the 2013 Rashko Sugarev prize for best short story). He has stories translated into English and Croatian.

“AFTERNOONS IN WHICH... is the first book by Aleksandar Hristov. It contains several short stories and a novella. Hristov’s works are a mix of irony, despair and hope, fantasy and realism.

The fictional rhythm is often swayed by surreptitious meters and voices. Imagine a late afternoon music class at the school of life in which the student with the worst hearing is the loudest singer. That student is evil itself. At his best, Hristov is a merciless storyteller. The novella ‘Africa’ deserves special attention.”

*Ani Ilkov*



**Ninko Kirilov** was born on December 7, 1983, in Vidin. He graduated with a degree in journalism at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”.

Kirilov has worked and is working as an author, presenter and editor of a number of specialized, information and lifestyle print, radio and online media.

In 2005 he won a journalism scholarship in the name of Stefan Prodev.

In 2012 he won the readers’ award in one of the biggest short story contests in Bulgaria.

In 2015 he won the magazine *Co-Mixer*’s comic scenario contest.

Kirilov is the founder and ideologist of the platform for unpublished writers *pisatelibeznigi* (writerswithoutbooks), which has existed since 2012, and periodically organizes readings of new and familiar artists who still have no books published.

According to the magazine *The Program*, with his texts he “is heading straight to the upper echelons of young Bulgarian literature,” while *Offnews* defined him as “one of the most interesting artists in contemporary Bulgarian prose.”

Critics define his book *Doubles and Animals* as “magical realism in the big city” and his stories as “pretentious, yet informal, ironic and sad.”

*Doubles and Animals*, Sofia, Black Flamingo Publishing, 2013

*Bogdan and Charlie Present: The Contest*, Sofia: ed. Ciela, 2012

*Co-Mixer* magazine, issue 6, Sofia, 2015

DOUBLES AND ANIMALS is Ninko Kirilov’s debut book. It contains 43 short stories and is a contemporary urban fiction with a touch of magical realism. Most book critics describe the book not as a pile of stories but as a bucket of characters appearing here and there and sketching the whole picture as a well shaped amalgam that looks more like a modern form of a novel than a usual bunch of unrelated stories.



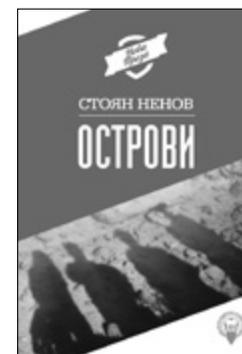
**Filip Markuliev** was born on March 26, 1983, in Sofia.

He graduated from the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy. He works for a construction and investment company in the field of his expertise.

His first book of short stories *Between the Walls* met with great response both from critics and readers.

“BETWEEN THE WALLS differs sharply from what young Bulgarian writers of today write about and in the way they write. In this story collection the author has the courage to call things by their own names, to write concisely, dynamically, to offer interesting narratives with a flair for ending, with humor and freedom of imagination. Filip Markuliev’s characters are strange guys, losers, young people who wander through life. Usually we do not notice them, but they exist around us. The writer observes them with a precise eye and succeeds in turning this nondescript small mass, which is part of our society, into memorable literary characters. For a long time, our young literature avoided dealing with the lower social depths, rubbing this wound without sentimentality. Filip Markuliev does this, and skillfully at that, showing good style and a special subversive irony, which in combination with the fantastic twists and turns, makes his stories both very readable and multilayered. The poet Ani Ilkov ranks him among the new wave of Bulgarian writers and noted that “if his look at life is without mercy, it is because he has the courage to look where the aesthetic literary establishment does not dare to think to look.” The writer Georgi Mishev states that the young author shows “the thing” outside the walls, and Georgi Gospodinov has compared him with Irvine Welsh.”

*Sylvia Choleva, writer and publisher*



**Stoyan Nenov** (born 1987) graduated in Bulgarian philology from Sofia University, where he also earned a master’s degree in literature and creative writing. He is the author of short stories and novelettes published in a number of anthologies and translated into English, Italian and Croatian. In 2011, his story “Just a Game” won first prize in the fiction contest of *Literaturen Vestnik* (*Literary Newspaper*). His debut book *Ostrovi* (*Islands*) was released by Sofia University Publishing House, as a part of the renowned publisher’s *New Poetry and Prose* initiative. Its pilot piece “Il Mostro” was awarded second place in the Rashko Sugarev 2013 contest and is published in Croatian language. Stoyan Nenov’s texts have appeared in various magazines such as *GRANTA Bulgaria*, *Vice*, *Vagabond*, *Stranica*, *Literaturen Vestnik* and others.

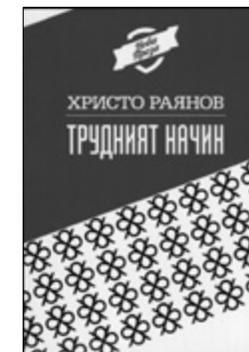
#### OSTROVI (ISLANDS)

This debut collection offers eleven pieces done with a natural storytelling flow – from witty to hilarious, perhaps absurd, but also scary and full with unexpected terror. *Ostrovi* (*Islands*) by Stoyan Nenov gives you an archipelago of intense narratives that pull urban prose out of an anachronistic world full of mystery, danger and morbid post-apocalyptic visions. The book is eclectic with its characters and plots and offers an intense journey from the Italian Alps, through the streets of Sofia and a fake Santa’s workshop all the way to a crime scene in a creepy commode.



**Vladimir Poleganov** was born in 1979 in Sofia. He graduated in clinical psychology and creative writing from Sofia University, and is currently working on a PhD in Bulgarian literature there. He is the author of one collection of short stories, *The Deconstruction of Thomas S* (published in 2013 by St. Kliment Ohridski University Press). His short stories have appeared in various literary magazines in Bulgaria, including *Stranitsa* (2014) and *Granta Bulgaria* (2014). In 2012, his short story, “The Well,” won an award in the *Rashko Sugarev* contest. “The Birds,” also a short story, is featured in Dalkey Archive Press’ annual anthology *Best European Fiction 2016* (edited by Nathaniel Davis, to be published in October).

THE DECONSTRUCTION OF THOMAS S (St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2013) is a collection of nine short stories and a novella about the uncanny and the inexplicable. The stories range from the literary “The Well” to several experimentations with the genres of the fantastic: “Model of the City in an Instrumentarium,” written in the New Weird genre, “The Feather,” a story that pays homage to the unclassifiable *Tainaron* by Leena Krohn, and the magical realist “I. C. Between the Lines.” The writing veers between the lyrical and the dreamlike of fantastic fiction, with an emphasis on the interior life of the characters, typical of the works of psychological realism. Ani Ilkov, Bulgarian poet says: “Vladimir Poleganov writes in the vein of what I’d like to call post-fantasy. His writing reveals a powerful, clearly articulated imagination and unquestionable depth of ideas. His stories confuse and terrify the reader, daring her to set off on a journey down the roads charted by this collection.”



**Hristo Stefanov Rayanov** was born in 1987 in Ruse, Bulgaria. He has a Bachelor’s degree in journalism and a Master’s degree in literature and creative writing from Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski.”

He works as a screenwriter. As a part of a screenwriting and content-writing team, he has worked on two seasons of comedy sketch shows, three seasons of the reality show “Survivor,” six seasons of the most popular comedy TV series in Bulgaria, and over 10 other projects, such as talk shows, stage shows, historical shows and game shows.

*Trudniyat nachin* (*The Hard Way*) is his literary debut.

#### THE BOOK THE HARD WAY

The book consists of seven short stories alongside a novella. There is a variety of themes and genres. The novella *Wealth* is a crime thriller. In it, many Bulgarian legends come to life, facing the characters with constant challenges. A cursed treasure from Ancient Roman times, mysterious killings, a mythical figure from Bulgarian folklore, a struggle between religion and faith, old friends and old loves in new roles – all together in one of the of the most charming and mystical Bulgarian regions.

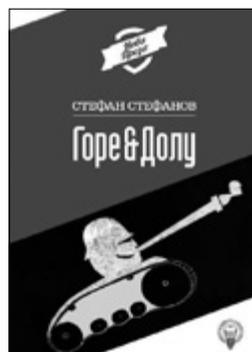
In the book there is also a historical short story about the Knights Templar, “The Bulgarian.”

A fantasy story about a haunted house and one’s power over life and death (“The House”);

Social stories about modern times such as “The Mother” and “Salvation,” where the poverty is at the root of bad and hard decisions, but also provides a great lesson for the characters;

The historical crime story “The Wolf” about a Holocaust survivor finding her old nemesis – a Nazi soldier;

And a humorous stories such as “On the Road” and “Summer,” which the characters have a hard time living in the big city.



**Stefan Stefanov** is a Bulgarian journalist and novelist who lives in Sofia, Bulgaria. Stefan Stefanov has a Bachelor's degree in journalism from UNWE Sofia and has published stories, interviews and reports in the fields of entertainment, politics and art. Meanwhile, Stefan has co-written, edited and run the online magazine *Meanstream* and has launched two cartoon/caricature exhibitions in Sofia. His second book will be out in the fall of 2015.

UP&DOWN (GORE&DOLU) is a fine blend of satire, absurdism and black comedy. The whole idea for the story is to offer an artistic view on and criticism of both the Bulgarian mentality and American foreign policy. In the book, the US declares war on Bulgaria over recently discovered oil deposits, which forces our country to bring back the draft. Most of the young guys such as the main character, Pavka, are supposed to fight the Americans. Pavka tries to find a way out of it as the paranoia increases with every single day, while the country expects to be attacked at any moment. The first part of the book "Paper Soldiers" explores topics such as patriotism, mass fear, war and law, all of it concocted in a strange alternate reality where nobody takes responsibility for anything and anyone. The second part of the book is called "Mosh Pit in Tongo" and it is more dedicated to Bulgaria...in Africa. After the conflict with the US, the Bulgarian government sends an army to a no man's land in Africa called Tongo. Officially, the Bulgarian troops are on a peacekeeping operation, but two years later they find out they've just been kicked out because the politicians were afraid of them. As the Bulgarian army colonizes Tongo, the mission turns into hell for Pavka, who desperately wants to get back home. When your task is to escape from an African nightmare in a Bulgarian colony, you really have to run quick and never look back. "Mosh Pit in Tongo" is a dark satire of the dark side of Bulgarian reality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but explored with a sense of humor. The third part "Friendly fire" puts a comma but not a full stop at the end of this story of an individual who tries to stay sane in a world where you really have to pay for it.



**Svetoslav Todorov** is a journalist and writer, born in Varna in 1989. He is currently based in Sofia, where he majored in Bulgarian studies and visual culture at Sofia University. As of 2015, he has been an editor at *Capital Light Weekly Magazine*, which is part of Economedia – the biggest business media publisher in Bulgaria. His topics of interest include music, cinema, theatre, human rights, and social issues, which can also be found in his creative writing. He is also part of Indiotique, a DJ collective in Sofia dealing with organizing alternative/experimental rock concerts. He is currently working on a multimedia project co-written with the London-based writer Ivan Raykov – excerpts of it were published in the print edition of *Granta Bulgaria*, Plovdiv-based *Stranica Magazine* and upcoming issue of the bilingual *Klaxon Press*.

HORATA, KOITO ZASPIVAHA SAMI (THE PEOPLE WHO SLEPT ALONE, released by Sofia University, 2014) is a collection of short and micro stories, based around the themes of loneliness, social anxiety, search for identity, and family ties. Upon its release the book received mostly positive reviews, with some critics finding links between the stories and inspiration from the neo-noir genre. Two of the stories have been released on audio. "Bezbolezneno" ("Painlessly") was featured in the online edition of *Granta Bulgaria*. Acclaimed author Georgi Gospodinov has described the writing as hardly categorizable and inspired by the genre of the interview and social media tendencies.



**Bistra Velichkova** was born in 1986 in Sofia. She graduated in journalism at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” and earned a joint Master’s degree in European Studies from Twente University, the Netherlands, and Westfälische Wilhelms-University of Münster, Germany.

Her stories and poems have been published in the *Fiction Writers Review*, *Granta* (Bulgaria), *Vagabond*, *Kultura*, *Literaturen Vestnik*, *Starshel*, *LIK*, *Stranitsa*, *Moré*, *Fakel* and *LiterNet*, among other places.

Her work has won multiple awards, including the *Rashko Sugarev Prize* for best short story, the *Veselin Hanchev Prize* and *Dimitar Boiadjev Prize* for poems, a fiction fellowship at the *Sozopol Fiction Seminars of the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation*.

Bistra’s first book – a collection of short stories *Small, Dirty and Sad* (Riva Publishers, 2014), won first place in the Southern Spring National Contest for Debut Literature in Haskovo (2015).

#### SMALL, DIRTY AND SAD

*a short story collection by Bistra Velichkova*

The voice of the young writer Bistra Velichkova is surprisingly harsh and mature. Her debut – a collection of short stories entitled *Small, Dirty and Sad* – explores the fate of disintegrating Bulgarian reality, which has been falling apart and away in the years following the fall of the Iron Curtain (a historical period known as *Prehoda* or “The Transition”). Most of the stories are written from the first-person perspective. While guaranteeing a high level of authenticity in depicting the characters, this technique can easily turn into a double-edged sword in the hands of the inexperienced storyteller. It must be emphasized that Bistra skillfully and almost brilliantly handles this difficult challenge.