

# Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2024

# P



NATIONAL  
PALACE OF CULTURE  
CONGRESS CENTRE  
SOFIA



NATIONAL  
**BOOK CENTRE**



ТОЗИ ПРОЕКТ Е РЕАЛИЗИРАН  
С ФИНАНСОВАТА ПОДДРЕПА  
НА МИНИСТЕРСТВОТО НА КУЛТУРАТА

### **Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2024**

*Bulgarian-Language Prose* © Emmy Barouch, Evgeni Cherepov, Deyan Enev, Zdravka Evtimova, Zachary Karabashliev, Tsanko Lalev, Toni Nikolov, Mitko Novkov, Miroslav Penkov, Yanitsa Radeva, Nadezhda Radulova, Vasil Slavov, 2022-2024.

*English-Language Translation* © Traci Speed, Marina Stefanova, Petya Pavlova, Yana Ellis, Rumén Pavlov, Jessica Morris-Ivanova, Dilyana Kodjamanova, Rosalia Ignatova, Christopher Buxton, Miroslav Penkov, Ekaterina Petrova, 2024

*Editing, Proofreading* © Traci Speed, 2024.

*Design, Prepress* © Damyan Damyanov, 2024.

All Contents Copyright © National Palace of Culture – Congress Centre Sofia, 2024.

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

# Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2024



NATIONAL  
PALACE OF CULTURE  
CONGRESS CENTRE  
SOFIA



NATIONAL  
**BOOK CENTRE**



# CONTENTS

- NATIONAL PALACE OF CULTURE / 7 Tsanko Lalev / 51  
THE HOME OF THE BEES
- NATIONAL BOOK CENTRE / 8  
Toni Nikolov / 57  
UNFORGOTTEN SOFIA
- Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2024 / 9  
Mitko Novkov / 65  
LISTENINGS
- Emmy Barouh / 11  
ABOUT THE JEWS AND OTHER  
DEMONS  
Miroslav Penkov / 80  
RIVER IN THE LABYRINTH
- Evgeni Cherepov / 20  
OUT OF RANGE  
Yanitsa Radeva / 83  
THE YEAR THAT STARTED ON  
SUNDAY
- Deyan Enev / 30  
THE WRITER OF CHRISTMAS  
STORIES  
Nadezhda Radulova / 91  
YOZHI LIVES HERE
- Zdravka Evtimova / 36  
FRECKLED STORIES  
Vasil Slavov / 100  
STANZAS OF BLOOD
- Zachary Karabashliev / 44  
WOUND  
Translators / 108



## NATIONAL PALACE OF CULTURE

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

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

## NATIONAL BOOK CENTRE

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

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

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

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

Complete information is available at <http://ndk.bg> or upon request at [nbc@ndk.bg](mailto:nbc@ndk.bg).









B

# Emmy *BAROUH*

## About the Jews and Other Demons

Emmy Barouh is a journalist, translator, and writer. After the fall of the Berlin Wall she has worked as cultural attaché in the Bulgarian Embassy in Brussels and as a freelancer in different cultural fields: curator and commissioner of exhibitions, a leading figure at the FotoFabrika Festival.

She is the author of documentaries, a collection of prose, and essays. Her translations from French and Spanish have been published by Colibri and Janet 45.

She is currently a columnist at the Bulgarian Section of Deutsche Welle.

## Annotation

There are books of portraits, books of adventures, books of revelations, books of travels... *About the Jews and Other Demons* is a book that includes all of this. And a book beyond it. An inexplicable book that defies definition. A story astonishing in its honesty and airiness, which takes you through the large-scale picture of the wandering and suffering Jewish people, to finally shelter you in the orphaned heart of a grown-up girl who has lost her father.

*Maria Kassimova-Moisset*

Part historical research, part philosophical reasoning, part personal story: *About the Jews and Other Demons* hardly fits into our familiar genre frameworks. It is a wandering book, encyclopedic, poetic and erudite at the same time, constantly crossing borders and searching for its imaginary homeland. Emmy Barouh wrote not only the book about Jewry in Bulgaria, but about the fate of modern man in general.

*Dimiter Kenarov*



## About the Jews and Other Demons

EXCERPT *Translated by Ekaterina Petrova*

1993

1.

**O**n a November morning in a series of inevitable mornings, I got a call from the hospital, which I'd been visiting three times a day, for days on end. The previous evening, I'd left earlier than usual. I doubt I will ever forget that. My father had made a joke about my unsuccessful attempts to race against time. (A shortsighted delusion of insolent self-assuredness!) I'd absentmindedly rushed toward some long-postponed happiness that was owed

to me. I'll never know if what he longed to tell me back then was, "Stay, I don't know if there's going to be a tomorrow . . ."

I'd left, stungily clinging to the illusion that I could make up for the hours and days that I had mistakenly assumed belonged to me.

In the morning I realized that making up for losses was the most hopeless exercise of human self-assuredness. It was impossible to make up for lost time. From that moment on, every attempt to catch up with my future would be bound to go through the breathless escape from my past. Painfully, I came to realize that the past would keep getting closer and closer, while the future would keep getting postponed. And that it's solely within the ephemeral fleetingness between what has already happened and what still hasn't arrived that the only valid, ordinary, and definitive things would occur. They would always be somewhat incomplete. Like evenings that have been cut short, leaving unsaid words and unasked questions.

In the morning I would come to realize that unshared premonitions contain the greatest wisdom of human nobleness, which—with the Marranos' silent gesture—carries its secret into the beyond. And we're left feeling awkward and self-conscious in the face of hypothetical blame and unexpressed fright. Inscrutably lonely, the men of wisdom depart. And they leave us a few precisely calculated sips of oxygen—would these be enough for us to satisfy our mortal attempt to grow old meaningfully?

2.

As I climbed the stairs of the sordid hospital, which was soaked in the odors of the part of Europe that was in the process of gathering together its own remains after the fall of the Berlin Wall, I didn't know yet that the most offensive feature of its hideous past would appear before me in the shape of a body that was dear to me, which had been wrapped in a white sheet and left on a stretcher in front of the men's toilets—some people had shoved it into this space, which stunk of excrement, casually pushing it out of the still-breathing territory of the living. Something in these people must've been already dead, if they had allowed such primitive mediocrity and a lack of spirituality. My father's mortal remains were left by the toilets . . . Where had it fallen apart, that higher human privilege of compassion that binds the brief cycles of earthly life into a natural bridge between those who've existed before us and those who still haven't been born? How did it happen, that total disregard for the symbolism of habitable spaces, for the ritual of death and for its symbols, which give meaning to life itself as

living, as anxiety and incompleteness; the symbols, which release the past from the petty details of existence and grant it the absolute privilege of participating in the moral dimensions of the future—regardless of the heavy burden of human failures, and perhaps precisely because of them . . . I stood there, stupefied in the face of human failure: my own—I was late again!—and that of the orderlies who had infected the space with their biological unfitness to cross their own cultural boundaries. I wasn't expecting to get compassion or sympathy. The ritual I'd been refused had deprived not me, but them, of their human dimension as equally perishable, equally fleeting, anonymous accomplices in what was taking place.

3.

Death is part of the order of our existence—it's banal in its specific uniqueness. Laconic in its statistical accountability. Comprehensive—like a procedure, neatly concluded by incoming/outgoing records. Monumental—if we perceive death as the sole ruler of eternity, and eternity as our intransient present. The one-directional stare into nothingness transforms death into a boundary that can never be reached, into a boundary beyond the boundary.

It was infinitely clear to me that death was the only thing whose sharing between children and parents was emotionally denied. Despite the long path they jointly walked toward it, despite the previous rehearsals within the family, despite the knowledge that we all take part in its occurrence—not just in relation to others, but in relation to ourselves as well.

We all die differently. We all kill differently.

The different kinds of death that others choose for us and that we choose for others reveal human ingenuity's rich range. We kill with words, we're killed by silence, we kill with eagerness, we're killed by indifference. They kill us by pointing a finger, they kill us by ignoring us.

4.

An onslaught of words, an onslaught of memories . . . I stood in those toilets and didn't know how I would carry on. We had never talked about death as an intimate experience. My father was a vivacious, enthusiastic, and mighty optimist. He had selflessly traversed the century that we were leaving behind—despite his lineage, which made him “a concessioner of genocide,” despite the collapse of the illusions that had initially made him remain in the place where he was born, instead of joining the others in their move to the land of the ancestors. He had propagated life's aesthetics, he was social and free amidst the unfreedom of all the years he had lived through.

I was born and I grew up in that unfreedom. I was familiar with the whole great variety of lack of choices. I was familiar with all the expressions of the damage that mediocrity had wreaked on everything the system had produced—the primitive grayness, the resignation, the treacherous weariness, the acquiescence, the indifference, and the hopeless steamrolling over individuals. The resignation. He had protected me from all that! He had ensured I had a back-up exit. He appreciated defiance, difference, otherness. He never became resigned.

From the windows of my childhood room, I could see the domes of three differences: right in front was the mosque, the synagogue was to the right, and the Sveta Nedelya Orthodox church was just across. These were spaces that had drawn devotees for decades through the veil of invisible fear. My father occasionally went to the synagogue—they usually summoned him when they needed to achieve a quorum for communion with God. Beneath the triangle formed by the three temples' roofs, everyday life went on. A life without faith. A life of survival. A life without imagination. A life lived one day at a time. Back then I didn't ask myself whether a now could exist, if there was no tomorrow . . . The trams conveyed the exhausted builders of socialism back and forth. I observed them from the height of my childhood (on the third floor!)—a high vantage point and a haughty perspective of youth, which perceived the age of those born earlier as a malformation: an anthill of bodies without posture, with hands hanging in useless gestures, a dotted line of repetition. They never looked up. They were not interested in the minaret, or the cross, or the Star of David. At an equal distance from the three points of the triangle, a fourth symbol rose into the sky: the pole topped by the red star. The pole transformed the triangular geometry of harmony into a rhomboid.

I remember the day when the red star was dismantled, dangled on metal ropes, and carried off by a helicopter. From our balcony, my father and I watched the symbol's final wobbles in the sky over the city. Back then, I thought that the future could easily free itself from the symbols of the past, from that ascribed historical necessity. What I didn't understand was that reconciliation requires us to make the more difficult effort of looking back—to make sense of the past with all its symbols, with all its monstrous failures. Because what we are is a consequence of what we were, even before we actually were. I watched the red star swing back and forth. On the sidewalks, people lifted their heads and watched it, too, trapped in the timelessness of their confusion between yesterday's sense of doom and today's feeling of uncertainty.



5.

Years had gone by since the star was dismantled. In the general feeling of rapture brought on by the changes, my father used to invariably answer the question “How are doing?” by saying “Better than you!” Now I gazed at the white sheet and wished he would ask me how I was doing.

6.

Needless to say, he loved me more than he loved himself. With that unguarded spontaneity that gives children the most treacherous delusion—that their parents will be able to protect them. I owe my general sense of invulnerability entirely to his powerful disregard for backhanded malice. Once I really came to believe in it, my father left me. Was that my punishment being so self-assured? Realizing this offers no comfort.

In the enchanted merry-go-round of ever changing roles, children often imagine that the experience of their mothers and fathers is a padding, that their parents’ tempo slows down their own forward rush. Why are we in such a hurry? And what are we rushing to?

Our fathers had survived—only they know how!—though *the most deadly century*. And they had brought us—almost unscathed—across, into the approach to the next one. Burdened by the errors in the history books, by the hysterical assigning of blame, we participated in the treacherous lie of the ’90s, which had been generated by the transition’s cadres who painstakingly ranked people by erasing the past from their biographies. We aggressively pushed away our yesterday, unable to stand face-to-face with what was final.

7.

I was standing face-to-face with the most final loss of my entire life. It wasn’t the first. And it wouldn’t be the last. But everything I had suffered and written about before had been connected to some abstract *socium*, to a collection of nameless proletariat, to some kind of intelligentsia and to several betrayals. Some time ago, I wrote about betrayals, the subtlest ones: the kind that aren’t openly announced. And I wrote about the resistance with which, day after day, I approached that inevitable, unappealable, palpable loneliness. A loneliness that was a signal and a prediction that our time is running out, that it is impossible to start over, that we don’t have sufficient wisdom to forgive.

*The brief twentieth century* ended eleven years before its official calendar-sanctioned end. It ended with applause. And a funeral feast.

Our failure as children was that we tried to reject the time in which our fathers' generation had lived, and in doing so, we took our fathers out of the context of their own history and shoved them into the virtual reality of substitution, where it was hard to distinguish the double from the counterfeit. We wiped the past clean. Ours and theirs.

The pages torn out of their biographies rustle like a vague accusation toward our parents for having existed, for having lived; by the will of two other people, our mother and fathers had appeared at the wrong time and in the wrong place: the there and then, in which we had been conceived.

The creations rejected their creators.

The copies argued with the original.

The consequence revised its cause.

Would my grandfather have blamed his own grandfather for fleeing Spain in 1492 and settling down in the Balkans? Could it be that my children now regret that their grandfather did not follow the rest of the families who, once saved, went to seek a second salvation in the land of their ancestors? What time and what place would we choose to cozily settle into? What other world would we wish for our own trials? Is it possible for us to rewrite ourselves, to invent ourselves?

We hold disputes with the present. We live between nostalgia and hope. And we stubbornly trample on the only thing that belongs to us—a series of moments in their final whiff.

*Carpet, coffee with cream, a fireplace; a couplet, a guitar, a tuning fork.* Our imagination rejects the whiff of romanticism. Darkness brings us *brown, hearse, mud.*

8.

In the black-and-white aesthetic tradition, death is located in a tunnel from which light, clinical sterility, and a cosmic silence flow. Did I say silence? If the material particles absorbing the vibration of the tuning fork never die, are the sounds of the Mozart cavatina that my father loved to play still floating around the heavenly spheres? A fiddler on the roof of his cheerfulness! I never learned to accompany him.

The space around us is likely overcrowded with sounds that we're unable to catch, as they slip away in the absolute freedom of their unreachability. But these sounds do exist. It's just that the defense mechanism of our current times has tuned its receivers quite selectively. We are freeing up acoustic space for

modernity. We are freeing the future from the past. Besides knowledge, the past also contains suffering. We don't want either. We invest in increasing the analgesic assortment. Pain-relieving chemistry inserts a barrier between us and our pain. And this makes us incapable of empathizing with the pain of others. We guard our own nervous system and destroy the immune system of the community, whose very fabric is built of empathy—not with pain as a personal experience, but with pain as public knowledge.

*The bloodiest century*, the century of Pain, bequeathed to us the mind-boggling image of barbarianism. Against the background of the millions who were killed, we became desensitized to the specific instance of dying.

9.

He had died, specifically. Definitively. Forever. He'd never been good at pretending. His death was real. He had carried away the entire universe of his inimitableness. It wasn't his time. He wasn't tired. Whenever we talked—chaotically, energetically, engaged, and always in a rush, with him always ahead and me always trying to catch up with him, the topic was invariably the same: which parts of the past to preserve, what kind of future to build.

He was the greatest advocate of what was to come. He pleaded for its cogency brilliantly. He refused to listen to my whining and the whining of my friends. It was as though he had a property deed for the time in which he wasn't meant to live. He didn't understand our fears. He used to say that every attempt at jumping contains the risk of falling. Experience (chronologically and hypothetically) always precedes failure. And unless you overcome your natural fear of failure, you'll never jump.

My father's aporias . . .

What he wanted to say was that our absence from the static of things was most beautiful.

I stood before him like a confused sum of his illusions and raptures. All I could do was imitate them.



# Evgeni CHEREPOV

## Out of Range

Evgeni Cherepov had his debut as a novelist in 2012 with his novel *Supplementary Summer*, for which he received an accompanying award from the South Spring National Contest for Debut Literature, as well as a nomination for the Elias Cernetti National Literature Award in 2013. A few years earlier, from 2005–2013, he actively published stories in the periodical press. Having his book published was a turning point in the novelist's life. He gave up on both his life in Sofia and the engineering sciences (the author studied at the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering, and Geodesy from 2000 to 2005), and after a decade spent in the capital city, he chose to return to his hometown, Stara Zagora. In 2016, Evgeni Cherepov graduated from the University of Plovdiv Paisii Hilendarski, specializing in Bulgarian philology, and started a new job as a high school literature teacher in his hometown.

After a 12-year break, during which he successively became a father, a philologist, and a high school literature teacher, in February 2024, his second novel, *Out of Range*, was published. The first print run of the book sold out in less than a month.

## Summary

The novel's main themes are keeping a distance from global acceleration, the impossibility of turning life's pauses into an eternal escape, and the interaction between generations, considering their differing understandings about the contemporary world.

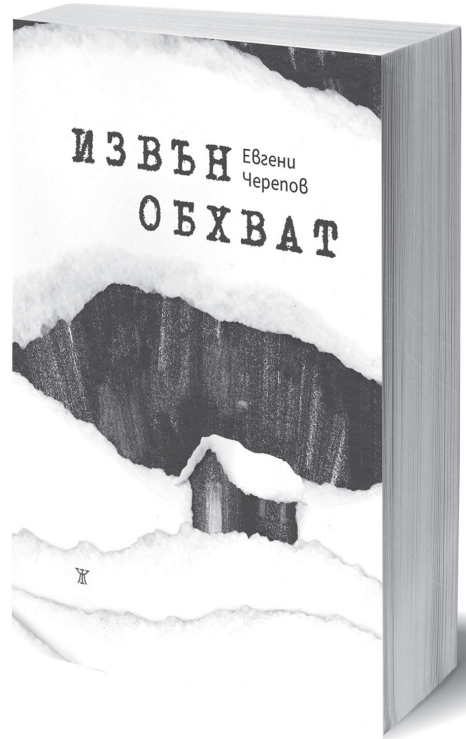
The action takes place in a small hotel (a large lodge) in the Balkan Mountains (Stara planina). There is no prominent protagonist—the emphasis alternates between several characters, presented to the reader in situational chapters (through showing), as well as in biographical retrospective chapters (through direct telling), narrated by an omniscient narrator. The personal stories of several generations illustrate the path of Bulgarians from a subordinate life in the Eastern Bloc before the fall of the Berlin Wall to the open-mindedness of a free contemporary human being.

The introduction pictures Georgiev and Karatanev—retired members of the military service, old friends, and the lodge-keepers. Georgiev is a former airman, a staunch communist and socio-nostalgic. The unfulfilled dream of the aircraft engineer Karatanev is also to become an airman.

Unexpected snow blocks the lodge guests, and they spend two “Decameronian” nights in the dining room. Dobrev (a literature teacher) is the one who stands out with his short lectures. On the other side stands the quiet Natalia.

Biographical retrospective chapters reveal the intergenerational and moral conflict between Georgiev and his son Yavor. While taking a walk, Yavor unintentionally witnesses a stranger hitting a man with the handle of his gun. Later on, the same stranger comes (in a black SUV, with security guards) to the hotel, looking for Natalia. Yavor lies to him.

Carefree days follow. The nights are full of conversations, dominated by Georgiev's socio-nostalgic lessons, Yavor's opposing reactions, and Dobrev's lectures on various topics. References to Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*



and Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* complete the sense of mountain harmony and the unconscious striving for philosophical conversations. Karatanev prefers to spend time alone in an enormous hangar nearby, where he observes his grandson's drawings that have arrived from abroad. Everybody is impressed by Dobrev's erudition. Natalia confesses to him and Yavor her terrifying story of violation by the man who had been searching for her earlier.

A day after the joyful celebration of New Year's Eve, the black SUV is spotted again. Natalia comes to the conclusion that it is time for her to run away. Her abuser, along with his security, intercepts her—Natalia's past climbs up in this peculiar *locus amoenus* in the magical mountain and pulls the characters out of their carefree lethargy. Now already acquainted with each other, the different generations will end up united by this new disaster.

Surprisingly, a helicopter takes off from behind the forest nearby. When it lands, it becomes visible that it is covered in children's drawings. A retrospective chapter reveals information hidden from the reader up to this very moment—how the helicopter appeared in the hangar near the lodge and how Georgiev taught Karatanev to pilot it. (The shotgun on the wall in the first act fires in the third).

Karatanev's first independent and illegal flight distracts Natalia's captors. The retired member of the military service, Georgiev, and Natalia's abuser (the two characters represent Bulgaria's recent past) shoot each other. The path of the new Bulgarian generations to the modern world is now clear.

The aim of the novel *Out of Range* is to broaden the points of view about who the contemporary Bulgarians are, bravely judging the outside world from their small provincial surroundings, out of range from the modern global world. Where do they come from, where are they going, how the local is viewed and oriented in the global. The novel should be a little bit of a supplementary timelessness, a Decameronian relaxation of the human soul in the midst of the 21st century plague—acceleration. The tempo of the novel is intentionally slowed down in order to resonate with its aim. The criminal thread makes up for this and creates suspense in the narrative perspective. The analog snow lodge has to comfort the characters' personal dramas and test the grounds for existence of a few Bulgarian generations in order to be able to follow their own path, even when reality calls them back down to their everyday life. The respectful references to Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, Dostoevsky's *Idiot*, and other classical literary works strive not only for the artistic effect of fitting in the world's metatext, but also for a verification of the entry of these provincial Bulgarian characters into the universe and the multifaceted map of contemporary human world.

# Out of Range

E X C E R P T *Translated by Marina Stefanova*

The dining-room glimmered with the rays of the low-hanging sun. The guests who were having breakfast would squint or tilt their heads, some would try to meet the sun with a smile, but the bright light quickly wore them out and they looked for a place to sit with their backs to the windows. Chairs got moved around, tables were dragged aside, but invariably one guest or another remained facing the bright rays of sunlight. Those had to chew or talk with their eyes almost shut.

Someone asked if they could have the curtains lowered. Aglika started untying them. In the mornings she was relatively free because the breakfast was a buffet. The soft heavy curtains shut over the windows, and the guests in the dining room could at last open their eyes. Only a few chairs remained empty, striped by the bright streaks of light seeping through the slit between the two curtains.

Natalia walked in, still drowsy, returned Yavor's nod, passed by a table occupied only by children, who were busy spilling tea and smearing jam or honey all over the tablecloth, and she took a plate of food and a cup of coffee and sat in one of the sunlit chairs – the only ones still free. On bright mornings her eyes would become green, Yavor had noticed, but now he couldn't catch the change because Natalia closed them at once, scrunching her face. Still sitting, she shoved the chair backwards till her face was no longer in direct sunshine. The stripe of light settled on her neck. The men sitting across from her collectively pushed the table closer to make it easier for Natalia to reach. She thanked them. From the glances that darted afterwards from women to men, one could easily figure out how the couples were divided.

Aglika, on the other hand, kept a sharp eye on Yavor ever since the moment he greeted Natalia with a nod. But he didn't notice her. Nor did he pay any attention to Dobrev, with whom he had just had a quick chat. Instead, he followed the ray of sunlight which was slowly climbing the skin of Natalia's neck. One really had to surrender to timelessness to be able to trace the barely audible movement of the bright spot premodulated by the window, which crawled up the neck of the young brunette, eager to flood the plantation of her eyes. The sun rose quickly

in the mountains, and just a couple of minutes later its rays licked Natalia's lips. Yavor tracked where the slit between the curtains was. Dobrev felt the pressure of Yavor's elbows on the table and smiled over his cup.

When the color of Natalia's eyes changed and she squinted, Yavor got up, pushed his chair away, crossed the dining room with a heavy gait, drew the curtain with a sweeping gesture, and blocked the sunlight. Aglika, who was just pouring a cup of tea at the buffet, saw the way Natalia glanced at him from the shadows. Yavor lowered his eyes and returned to his seat. Aside from the three of them, only Dobrev noticed what was going on.

Aglika overfilled her cup, and tea spilt over the tablecloth. She tossed a napkin over the wet spot, drew a quick sip, and choked. She started coughing, tears welled up in her eyes, a strand of hair came out of her otherwise tight ponytail and fell over her face. Aglika retired to the kitchen. When she came back a few minutes later, Yavor thought that she had touched up her otherwise light make-up, but then he figured it looked that way because her hair was now down.

The guests who had started breakfast earlier were already finishing and urging their kids to get up to go outside while the weather was still good. The forecast for the day was cloudy, so why not take advantage of the unexpected sun. The party left almost all at once, and the dining room emptied. Aglika reached for the windows to tie the curtains, starting with the one Yavor had drawn.

Dobrev approached Yavor.

"What would you recommend to someone who wants to avoid other people but still doesn't mind enjoying some sun? I think I've had enough of the bustle of the ski slope yesterday. The last couple of days I've gone on a few walks. I was thinking of maybe reading"—Dobrev lifted the bulky volume he was holding—"but don't want to stay in the room or to mingle with people."

Yavor tilted his head to read the title. He couldn't contain his smile.

"I think I know the place for you. Come on, let me show you!"

Then he led him through the hallway and, to Dobrev's surprise, up the stairs.

"Watch your head," Yavor warned him when they arrived at the attic floor huddled under the steep pitched roof. "I often hit my head until I got used to it. The laundry room is down in the basement, and this here"—he opened the odd-looking slanting door going through the roof—"is the drying room."

They went out onto a huge terrace, perhaps three by five meters, at least that's what Dobrev thought. All of it was encircled by a banister, with a metal frame welded over it, supporting hanging clothes-lines.

"I know from experience that this is an obstacle to the view," said Yavor and



started detaching the hooks of the clothes-lines. “I haven’t shoveled today’s snow, but there isn’t any drifting snow, so you should be okay. I’ll shovel later.”

Dobrev was still at loss for what Yavor meant. The terrace was at the back of the lodge and offered a generous view of the snow-covered pines on the opposite hill. The ski slope, the phone booth, the area around the front entrance, carefully cultivated by human hand: none of them were in sight. Even the sun was shining from the back. Ahead one could see only wild pines, the sky, and space. When Yavor went into the garret and produced a chaise-longue and two blankets, Dobrev moved his smiling glance to his book so his host would notice.

“A little mountain air therapeutic lounging, eh?”

Yavor was obviously pleased with himself.

“Well, yes. For me, at least, it works miracles. Here, take these thick blankets, because otherwise you’ll freeze.”

“Do you come here often? I mean, not to hang the laundry?”

“At least once a week. It depends on the weather. After this group of tourists is gone, there’ll be a load of bed linens to hang, so now you’re catching the right moment. Besides, the weather is perfect. Too bad I have work to do, otherwise I’d gladly join you. There’s one more chaise-longue inside and more blankets.”

“I wouldn’t say no to someone younger keeping me company, so if you have time, you’re welcome to join me later.”

Yavor thanked him and slipped downstairs.

Dobrev stood for a bit, stroking the book’s hard cover. The mountain in front of him promised a spirited tale—silent but sincere, uncomplicated by human words, universal and visually-sensory, unconcerned with individual interpretations. That’s what Dobrev thought. He thought other things as well: that he was going to gaze at a cliché, that at a secondary level he was going to experience emotions that have long been described in novels. These thoughts, however, soon surrendered to the view of the seemingly magic mountain towering above him, which breathed and itself produced air, and had not but the slightest clue about the myriad of symbols it produced for well-read people.

Dobrev sat and reclined, covered himself with the blankets, put the book in his lap, and squinted at the sky. Every now and then he opened his eyes to rejoice in the view. He was listening. A slammed door in the lodge, children’s shrieks on the other side of the building. Perhaps an isolated shout from the ski slope, or perhaps all was just his imagination, as the human ear isn’t used to complete silence. At one point, he reached for the bulge in his jacket where his wallet was in the inside left pocket, but quickly rested his hand on his stomach.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been lying like that when he heard the screech of the opening door. "It's here," he heard Yavor's voice. "Thank you!" answered Natalia, then sunlit silence ensued until Natalia's voice mustered the courage and came from around the door:

"Will I bother you if I try what you're doing?"

Dobrev turned his head.

"Not at all. Breaks could be shared as well."

He was about to get up and help her with the other chaise-longue, but she was determined to do it on her own. She dragged the second chaise-longue with the blankets. She sat down and before reclining asked again:

"Are you sure you don't want to be alone, sir?"

"I'm sure I'd rather we skipped the formalities," replied Dobrev.

"Well, I feel a bit awkward. I want to be respectful of your age," she explained, and added, "Most of all, respectful of your profession."

"Oh, yeah. I see," sighed Dobrev. "All the same, I haven't been your teacher. And trust me, after a certain age, one prefers young people to address him less formally."

"Why is that?"

"Why do you think? At least through speech to hear death further away. Or not so much death as aging..."

"But sir, you don't look old at all. Oh! Let me try again. You don't look... old."

"I never much cared about how I looked," continued Dobrev. "Well, except in my youngest years: vanity is inevitable when you're young. But from a certain age onward, the emotional age can far outstrip the physical. And then you don't care how you look anymore, because you're forty, but feel a hundred and forty," smiled Dobrev.

"Could this happen earlier in life?" asked Natalia.

"Oh, sure. And if that's the case," Dobrev paused, "please join the mountain therapy for emotionally old people."

"I usually try not to intrude, and I wouldn't bother anyone here at all, but..." Natalia replied immediately, then stopped for a second. "When Yavor told me what the reading place he showed you was, sir—sorry, that he showed you," I just couldn't resist. Not that there aren't nice views everywhere. And it's not so much about the views, either... Well, it's different. You said it very well... about the breaks."

Dobrev kept silent for a moment before continuing the conversation.

"People have always needed breaks. Even way before we found ourselves in the current accelerated daily life. We've always needed spiritual meaning,

however broad that concept may be. Well, just to stop for a bit, to step off the rollercoaster of our supposedly purposeful life.”

“Why ‘supposedly’?”

“Many goals are socially formed. Externally set. They’re not your own. I’ll give you an example,” Dobrev started. “You have to be an excellent student; you and your boyfriend mustn’t make out at bus stops; you must give birth before you turn thirty, but not without being married; working as a waitress after twenty-five doesn’t look good, and after thirty you must start climbing the corporate ladder; oh, and yes—your job must be prestigious and well-paid... or at least one of the two, preferably the latter.”

“I get it, and I agree.”

“It’s like a race with life itself.” Dobrev was just warming up. “Only the rules have been set by someone else. Human beings need to turn inwards, to disconnect from their profane existence, at least for a bit. That’s why people went to church on Sundays back in the day, right? You plow, you hoe, you sweat, you suffer for the daily necessities, for survival, but on Sunday you put on your best clothes, and go to church to detach yourself from the dirt, to connect for a bit with that other world, the one beyond.”

“Not many people go to church on Sunday nowadays. And not many believe in... God,” Natalia added hesitantly.

“Well, you can leave God out of it!” Dobrev quickly replied to reassure her. “Replace Him with harmony, peace. Peace. That’s the right word, I guess. If you live in peace... and I don’t mean to exclude all human ardors, impulses, or the desire to accomplish something meaningful... If you die in peace, you’re already with God. But if you don’t stop for even a second, how will you feel that peace? How are you to feel the world from the inside out?”

“I’m not sure I know what peace is.”

Somewhere downstairs a door slammed shut; children screamed and stomped on the stairs. Dobrev turned his head toward the noise and smiled at the irony which accompanied his lecture on peace: this helped him postpone his question to Natalia some more.

“Do you read?” he asked. “I mean, are you an avid reader? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Yes. With minor interruptions, I’ve always considered myself an avid reader.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Dobrev approvingly. “Literature tries... good literature tries to create such spaces for us... just like this terrace.” Dobrev traced the terrace

with his glance. “You said it yourself: you couldn’t resist coming here after you found out about it, even without having seen it. Why?”

“I have to admit,” Natalia lowered her head, “that yesterday, on the ski slope I enjoyed your conversation with Karatanev. The one at dinner, too. You don’t hear conversations like that every day. And I also liked Yavor’s response when I asked him what reading spot he recommended to you was. He said ‘a hidden spot.’”

“He was quite right!” Dobrev raised his index finger. “A hidden spot! I couldn’t have said it better. We’re so out of breath nowadays that we often need to hide somewhere for a while. To shelter from the unstoppable acceleration of modern times. What better place for that than the mountains. And there you have it: a hidden terrace in the mountains, a sun lounger, blankets—simply wonderful.”

Dobrev patted the edge of the book. They fell silent.

“Everything is different up here,” Natalia chimed in after a short silence.

“Yes, it’s self-sufficient,” replied Dobrev and turned to her with a smile. “The timelessness here captivates you and you can literally forget your life down there.”

“And when you forget it, there’s your peace.”

“There’s this poet from the eighteenth or nineteenth century, William Blake,” Dobrev decided to postpone his question a little longer. “I forgot the title of the poem, and I’ll quote from memory: “Great things are done when men and mountains meet; this is not done by jostling in the street.”

“Sounds great. Though, to be honest,” Natalya said, pulling the blanket up almost to her nose, “I’m not sure what’s the great thing I’m meant to do, even though I’ve already met this so-called magic mountain.”

“Well, what’s greater than peace,” said Dobrev, playfully referring to his previous statement.

“I couldn’t agree more.”

Dobrev drew his blanket down to his waist.

“Do you feel out of place here?” he asked. “Because, realistically speaking, that would be natural, if you’re here for the first time, at least.”

“For the first time, yes. And no, I don’t feel out of place.”

“My point exactly.” Dobrev raised his index finger again. “The space here is different from what we’re used to in the city, but it doesn’t make you feel like some kind of drifter. Instead, it shelters you as a new home. ‘Home vs. road’ is a common opposition in literature; I won’t bore you with details now, but in some paradoxical way, the mountain reconciles these two opposing concepts. Having grown up in the city, you’re a stranger here, but you are also at home. Because the place is like that.” Dobrev snapped his fingers. “The longer you stay up here,

the more your ideas about time, the world, and life change. One adjusts one's concepts here."

A cloud peeped out from behind the hills, drifted down the pine tops, and quickly descended further down to creep between them like mist.

"This all sounds great. I already enjoyed the conversation yesterday," said Natalia, raising the blanket to her eyes, "but life down there stays the same and is keeping a close watch on you. No matter how long you hide up here, the trap down there will snap again once you're back."

Dobrev pushed the blanket down to his ankles. He was about to stand up, but decided that this might scare Natalia, so he curbed his impulse. When he spoke again, he was deliberately not looking at her, but at the cloud that was quickly taking over the hill: its cloak was already blurring the view, and it seemed as if it would soon reach the lodge.

"Yesterday, I was startled by some of the things you said," Dobrev began, glancing at the mist engulfing the heights, but then he turned to Natalia. "What happened to you?"

And Natalia spoke. At first with long pauses, which Dobrev did not interrupt, nor did he encourage the girl to continue; he even tried not to move under the blanket. He was just waiting for her to realize whether that was really why she had come to this hidden mountain terrace. The pauses gradually became shorter, and her speech took on a rhythm, finally pouring out.



# Deyan *ENEV*

## The Writer of Christmas Stories

Deyan Enev was born on August 11, 1960, in Sofia. He graduated from the English Language Secondary School in Sofia and holds a degree in Bulgarian Philology from Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. He is married and the father of two children. Enev has worked as a painter at the Cinema Centre, a night porter at the psychiatric ward of the Medical Academy Sofia and the surgical ward at IV City Hospital, a press operator at the military factory ZEST Komuna, and a teacher. He has written over 3,000 interviews, articles, essays, features, and satirical pieces for the newspapers *Maritsa*, *Novinar*, *Express*, *Otechestven Front*, *Sega*, and *Monitor* and has two years of experience as a copywriter at a marketing agency.

In 2010, he took part as a lecturer in the Creative Writing course at Sofia University, organised with the assistance of the publisher Georgi Grozdev. In 2012, he was a lecturer at the fifth anniversary edition of the creative writing seminar organised by the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation in Sozopol.

Enev is currently a columnist at *Portal Kultura*. He has published twenty-three books.

His selected short-story collection *Всички на носа на гемията* [*Vsichki na nosa na gemiyata*] came out in four editions: Fama,

2005; Faber, 2007; Siela, 2009; and Riva, 2019.

He was the winner of the Zlaten Lanets Short Story Prize of the *Trud* newspaper in 2006, the Chudomir National Prize for a humorous short story (2015), and the recipient of the Order of St Cyril and St Methodius First Degree (2016).

In 2008, the Austrian publishing house Deuticke published a collection of his selected stories under the title *Zirkus Bulgarien* in a German translation by Norbert Randow and Kathrin Tsemrich. The afterword and selection were the work of Dimitar Dinev.

In August 2010 the London publishing house Portobello published his collection of selected short stories *Circus Bulgaria* in English. It was translated by the Edinburgh-based Bulgarian writer Kapka Kassabova. The collection was longlisted for the prestigious Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award two years in a row (2010, 2011).

In 2023 the Italian publishing house Bottega Errante published his short-story collection *Всички на носа на гемията* [*Vsichki na nosa na gemiyata*], under the title *Circo Bulgaria*, translated by Giorgia Spadoni. The book won the Polski Kot Award for translation from a Slavic language into Italian.

## Summary

The invisible, the undervalued, the unnecessary people in our country may not have representatives and spokespersons, but they do have writers, albeit a few. Deyan Enev is one of those who write about them without drama, exaggerated pity, or melodramatic sentiment. It is enough that he sees them, witnesses their existence somewhere in the folds of life, and declares their eligibility as characters. The author/storyteller is a flaneur who wanders the city streets and literally takes inventory of the characters he meets on them, remaining distant but not indifferent (“That old man reminded me of a bird left behind by the flock. But what could I do? Start him talking? I didn’t feel like talking either. So the two of us just sat there puffing on our cigarettes...” – „Кафенето зад ъгъла“ [Kafeneto zad agala]).

The characters between these pages are not “interesting” or pleasant but rugged and unpolished, damaged and broken, mired in the dirt of the world or simply in the indifference of passing time, trapped by their poverty, helplessness, old age, loneliness, forgottenness, or—like the young lion from „Стъпките“ [Stapkite]—shot at the very moment of their leap. The author doesn’t look to

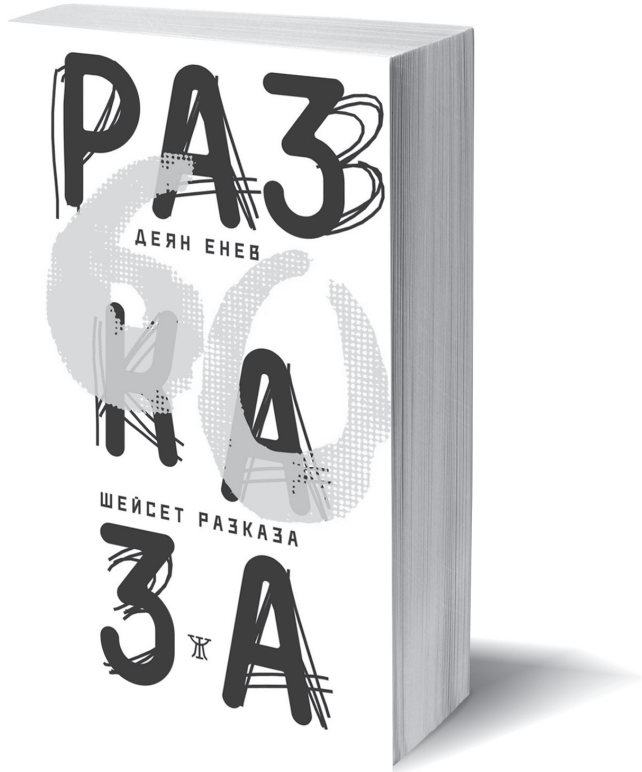
impress us with their otherness but instead collects their similarities precisely in anonymity in story after story—just like the local loon Oncho does by collecting signatures in a tattered notebook when he meets a human. Yes, the ambiguity is intentional and it's aimed towards us—not just another human being, but a human, because, as Oncho explains, “I’m making a list of the good people. It will be needed one day.” („Клисарят“ [Klisaryat]). There is actually a person like this in Plovdiv as well, and writers know of him! The feeling is that Deyan Enev also knows every one of his characters, that they are not fictional but he has met them. Their prototypes are everywhere and even when we feel like they are repeating the narrator makes them stand out, compelling us to hear every individual story.

No, no one is saying that the humiliated and abused are necessarily morally better people, and the rest are bad—no one is making such an easy and unimaginative connection. And yet in this human brokenness between the covers, in this inevitable humility and resignation before his fate, lies the essence of what Christ set forth in the beatitudes—“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.” As much as he tries to remain invisible and distanced, almost aloof, the narrator cannot fully conceal his pity (in the good sense of the word), his human kindness.

Yet perhaps one of the main characters here is not a person but *Panta rhei*, the flow and passing of everything. As I said, the author does not turn this into drama, although it is precisely the essence of the quiet implosive drama in these stories—there is a person and then there isn't, it's so simple (as in „Продавачът на вестници“ [Prodavachat na vestnitsi] and numerous other stories). The characters share the fate of the boy from „Приказка“ [Prikazka], who “watched time passing by and now he's gone.” It's the same that awaits us, who are seemingly on the right side of life. And as it is said in another story—you can't hold the world to account. Transience is precisely what Deyan Enev tells about on these pages.

Many of the stories are exactly as the author describes them—just a lump of salt for which there is no time, or perhaps no point, to stay inside him for long enough to be able to take shape. The stories are devoid of intentional literariness (but are very poetic in a subdued and melancholic way), of artful twists and turns, of spectacular punchlines and implausible catharses. They are just storytelling per se, a registering of a presence, a documenting of the chronology of a life, a course of inevitability. So much so that the reader, accustomed to action and tricks, might say, “Well, was that it?” Yes. Yes, that was it! What else did you expect except that “everything had sunk into the well of time” („Зид“ [Zid]).





## The Writer of Christmas Stories

*Translated by Petya Pavlova*

**I**t used to be. But it was over.

Until just a few years ago, in the runup to Christmas, he would start getting calls from editors.

“Mr N, how are you? Good to hear, good to hear. You’re doing a little Christmas story for us again like last year, aren’t you? Thank you so much. Looking forward to it.”

And he would sit down and write a little Christmas story. Sometimes the stories turned out sad; other times, they were funny. They were published in newspapers and magazines surrounded by wreaths of fir tree branches, splendid colour illustrations of sleighs pulled by reindeer, old men in red coats with big beards, Snow Whites in miniskirts. How many stories like that had he written throughout the years? He didn’t know, he had stopped counting them long ago,

but however you looked at it, that was a lifetime of work. He also had a record of sorts in his archive – fifteen Christmas stories in fifteen different publications in the same year. His golden age. At some point he even made up his mind to publish all his Christmas stories in a book; he collected them all in a folder and called a publisher. He met the publisher. The publisher had manicured nails, glasses which cost two grand, and an expensive scarf around his neck. They sat down in a café, they talked.

Then the publisher stopped answering his phone. Mr N called him a few more times then gave up. He didn't want to be a bother.

After a while he saw that the publisher had done a deluxe edition with a selection of Christmas stories by the classic authors.

He sat down and reread the stories in his folder. True, they were too ordinary, written, as he defined it himself, from street level. There were no fireworks, glamour, or stars. But at the end of the day they were real Christmas tales, unembellished, telling ordinary people's stories, sometimes poignant, sometimes heartbreaking, sometimes downright shattering, and sometimes everyone in them had a good laugh because often, behind ordinary people's stories, real storms, slides, and even whole funfairs lie hidden. He had learned as much from his craft.

But it was what it was. Mr N was fully aware that even the lowliest extra in the lavish Coca-Cola commercials that had the budget of a feature film had made a lot more money than him, the ordinary writer of Christmas stories. Obviously the world didn't like reading anymore. The world liked watching. Staring. That's just how it was.

What can you do? Everything has to end.

"Nobody's called this year," he admitted to his wife when they sat down for lunch one Saturday not long before Christmas. His wife had been working as a pharmacist all her life; she was retired now but still worked. Theoretically, he should have been retired as well. But only theoretically. That's why the payments for the Christmas stories were important for him. But this year there would be no payments. They were not anticipated. That's what he was trying to tell his wife. And she understood.

"Big deal! Who cares?" his wife tried to reassure him in her usual manner, completely diminishing his contribution to the family finances, which was reduced to almost zero anyway. She wasn't totally wrong, but she wasn't totally right, either. She knew it and he knew it.

He looked her in the eyes. And also understood. She was just heroically trying to lift him out of his gloom.

“Go get some cookie cutters from the supermarket. The grandkids are coming today or tomorrow and I’ll need to entertain the little rascals somehow. Get some bread and milk, too.”

She left some money on the table for him and went to have a rest because she was working that night.

He took the money, put on his red fleece jacket, donned his motheaten brown wool hat, glanced in the mirror, promised himself to crop his beard because he was starting to look like the gallant robber Rumcajs, and went out. The air was crisp and snowflakes were starting to flutter from the sky. It looked like it was going to be a proper Christmas.

He went into the store and began walking around the aisles. Suddenly he heard a child shout, “Mummy, Mummy, look, it’s Santa Claus!”

He turned around and saw a pretty young mother with a little boy by her side. The boy was pointing at him.

“I’m so sorry!” said the mum. “Sorry!”

He laughed. There, he had his Christmas story after all. So what if it would remain unwritten. It would make his wife cry with laughter anyway. And that was enough for him. One person’s laughter is still a present.

Only when he unlocked the front door at home did he realise he had forgotten to buy the cookie cutters.

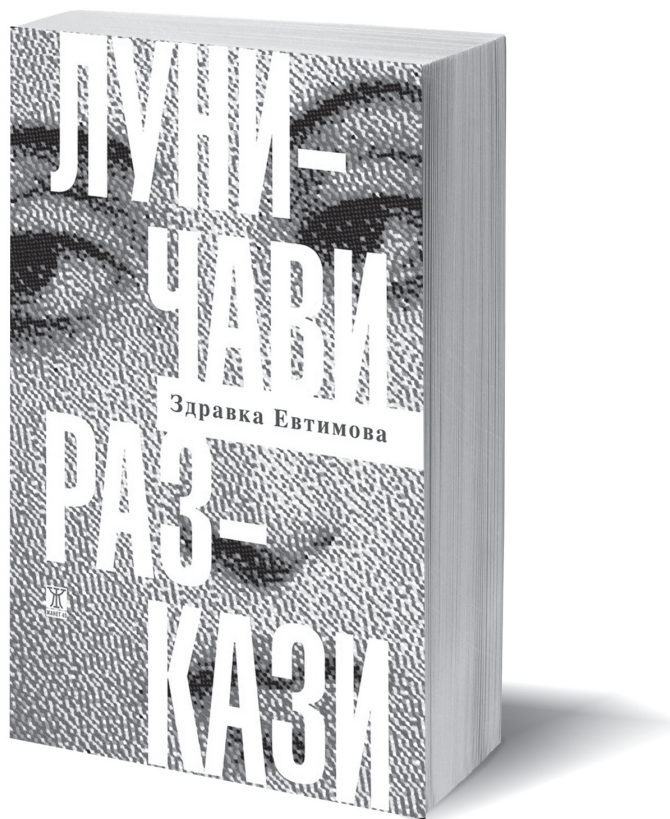


# Zdravka *EVTIMOVA*

## Freckled Stories

Zdravka Evtimova (1959) is a Bulgarian writer and translator, and the winner of numerous literary accolades, including Bulgaria's Favourite Writer at the eponymous show on Bulgarian TV in 2021. Her novels and short story collections have been published in Bosnia, Canada, China, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Iran, Italy, Spain, North Macedonia, Serbia, the UK, and the USA. Her short story "Vassil" was one of the award winners in the BBC international short story competition. The short story "Blood of a Mole" is included in a literary anthology for middle school education in the USA as well as in Danish high school textbooks. The short story collection *Pernik Stories* won the Balkanika award for Best Book of the Year. Evtimova's novel *Thursday* was published in Serbia (Arhipelag, 2023), North Macedonia (Antolog, 2021), and a Czech translation is in the works. The novel *The Same River* hit the shelves in Bosnia in early 2024 (BuyBook), and her latest novel, *The Wolves of Staro Selo* (awarded the PEN Translates prize in the UK by December 2023), is forthcoming in early 2025 (Héloïse Press).

Zdravka Evtimova's copyright is managed worldwide by Sofia Literary Agency (<https://sofialitag.com/>)



### Summary

This collection contains twenty pieces never failing to manifest Evtimova's brilliant storytelling skills, both in the register of the comic and the tragic. The characters and the situations she puts them into cannot leave the reader indifferent. Evtimova's ability to weave narrative within narrative, to present situations, some more unbelievable than others, yet completely realistic despite the unexpected twists and turns, to construct vivid dialogues with a subtle sense of the paradoxical and the aphoristic, is unsurpassed and is the very reason she is the epitome of the recognizable and beloved storyteller to thousands of Bulgarians. The themes she deals with are important and relevant not only to the Bulgarian society—whether it is preserving the human in inhuman situations, living and surviving in a toxic family environment, or overcoming socially deviant practices, they are always presented with a great deal of empathy and humor.

Krasimir Lozanov

# Milena the Quarrel

*Translated by Yana Ellis*

**T**heir entire kin were awkward—from the baby to the granddad, and their intellect—a wire that doesn't bend, doesn't break, just rusts. That's what they are. Her granddad's name is Andon, forever grumpy, as if someone had lit a pile of manure inside his head and it was now smoking eternally, impossible to be around. So, when the child was born, what should they call it? Not Antonina, not Antonia, but Anda. Fine to call her Anda, but since the roots are rotten, what good could come out from her?

Little Miss Anda exerted herself, she went and made soap all on her own, boiled it, made the moulds. It wasn't soap, but malice; she piled it into a crate and carved letters into each bar: 'THE EX'. Think about what you're going to wash with your EX, ladies. That Anda, so impudent, almost bitter. Just imagine what she does next! Walks past our house and asks:

"Milena, how's Kaloyan? Would you tell him I've been looking for him?"

Kaloyan is my son. I'm drawing your attention to this fact, just so you can see what a twisted root that girl Anda is.

"Why're you looking for him?" I ask.

"To give him this soap, a present from me." That impudent creature hands me a bar of soap in which she has carved five block capitals: "THE EX."

"Just think what dirty laundry you could wash with that, huh?" she says suggestively.

Good job I'm a civilised woman and don't say straight to her face, "Look how fat you are!"

"So, Kaloyan is already your EX, you say?" I conclude.

"Precisely!" she confirms.

"And you're fat!" I bark.

Then she falls silent. For someone from the Andon kin to fall silent is like drawing milk from a worm—in other words, it never happens. My eyesight is a bit weak, so I could just be imagining it, but is that a tear glistening on Anda's eyelashes? She's as likely to shed tears as the stove where I boil the bean soup.

"Yes," I said. "Fat."

She turned her back to me. True, she was plump, but their kin are like that—God had given them meat and throats. Her dad, Dacho, for example, when he

gets a few drinks in him and raises his voice, you can hear him from Pernik all the way to the central train station in Sofia; if the Struma River happens to be frozen, the ice cracks. If her grandad Andon gets drunk and opens his mouth to sing—this I’ve seen with my own eyes, because the cherry tree is in my own garden—the damn thing blossoms, all its buds open because of that drunkard’s song.

“Then,” Anda says, “give me back my soap. Your son won’t be my ex.” This is the point I need to mention: though Kaloyan is my only son, he is a dimwit when he bends his brain towards Anda. It’s true, he travels more than a sailor does—one day he’s in Radomir, the next, in Tarnovo, and the one after that, in Ivaylovgrad. I tried to tell him, “Kaloyan, son, go study dentistry. That way you’ll be close to me and your dad.” Yet he digs in his heels and tells me he can’t stand blood, and now here we are, he’s being sent all the way to Paraguay. When he goes on his travels, he brings a present for that Anda, then he’s off again, and Anda, as impudent as a goose, comes round to say:

“Milena, Kaloyan has sent a present for me, hand it over, will you?”

I don’t hand it over. It’s not like I’m DHL or Bulgarian Mail to pass parcels along.

Anda took back her ugly soap. She’s a hairdresser and that’s where my poor Kaloyan met her. She cut his hair to the skull, and that’s when the story got complicated. That’s how simple his intellect is—he prostrated himself before her plump thighs.

“Is this why your father and I were saving money, son?” I ask him gently. I had three jobs. I’m a seamstress, but I began cutting fabric too, even learned to make patterns for Italian dresses, calculating, drawing, creating; I pop over to Coco Chanel’s brain for advice, I copy her crazy lines and frills. All my clients are pretentious, dolled up and pernickety, you would think they don’t eat with their mouths like you and me, but with their brains. Don’t give me any of that. For Kaloyan I tried hard and made progress. Just so that he could go to university, become somebody.

He graduated, but he didn’t become somebody. He went for a haircut, and we got stuck with Anda. His father was a miner; after they closed down the mine, he went to work as a builder, then they closed the building site; and finally, he went to work for the railways, and he’s still there. I can’t complain about my husband—the moment I look at him, he stops talking; he’s a very reasonable man.

“Milena,” he says, “I’ve got to go for a drink with Petko, but I know you’ll flip out. What can I do so you won’t lose it? If you want, I’ll dig around the trees in the orchard.” He digs in the orchard, then goes off to drink with Petko and I go and

bring him home peacefully, because he's dug in the orchard and saved himself from me reading him the riot act. My anger is volcanic—it spews, it burns, it buries. In Pernik's Kalkas neighbourhood, they call me Milena the Quarrel. In this peaceable neighbourhood, where children learn to argue before their first breath, to be nicknamed “the Quarrel” means you are something out of the ordinary. I was a draughtswoman, but what exactly could I draw after the foundry went bankrupt and turned into a garage? They laid me off, so I began sewing.

I have only one child, Kaloyan. My husband turned his hands to a stall in the market, but you can't make a cucumber seller from a miner, can you—he would give this friend or that one something for free, an apple to a child, wave off the debts of the old grannies—that's who he is. I'm furious with him, but I am not swapping him. *Who else is going to look after this silly billy?* I think to myself. *Who else is going to call me “Milena, sweetheart”?* “The Quarrel is about to go off the deep end again,” they say the moment I show my nose in the street.

“You've gone off the deep end again,” Anda said to me too. “If you've picked up the sprinkler to kill caterpillars on the quince in November, we're gonna have a fight.”

The other unfortunate thing is that we're neighbours—it really is quite insulting, my son not coming back home to us—I've cooked moussaka and pancakes with chocolate, yet he, the bird-brain, turns in at Anda's gate.

“She only studied to be a hairdresser,” I lament. “And you, you studied Eye-tea. How do you see an Eye-tea with a hairdresser, those blunt scissors?”

“She might be blunt scissors, but she's not stupid,” Kaloyan said. “She can cut anything and ruin it too, but with the scissors she can cut your hair so you won't recognise yourself. She can give you beauty, you understand?”

“You're as simple as that crow your father didn't shoot because he felt sorry for it,” I told him. “You know how much I saved, how many dresses I designed and sewed, how I broke my back working three jobs just so you could graduate?”

“I know,” said my beloved son. “I've travelled the world, mum. I went to Paraguay, London, and even Ivaylovgrad, but there were no girls like Anda anywhere.”

“Oy, muppet—if you were to catch a pig in her granddad Andon's pigsty, you wouldn't find the same pig in Paraguay or London or Ivaylovgrad, would you, because it's ours, local, a Pernik pig.”

But he didn't listen to me. He thrust his head so high in the air that you'd think his was the only head in this world. “Listen to me, young man,” I pointed out to him. “She's fat.”



“Your eyesight is thin, mum,” my son replied.

“Is that so?” I asked him. “And who exactly designs all these Italian dresses in Boutique Iveta? I design them in my head, then cut them on the table, they’re more Italian than the ones made in Italy. Listen, all the girls come to me—from the Language School, from the School of Economics—and you know there’s no better economics than in Pernik—the girls from Mandjata come too. I even had an MP turning up—I skinned her like a cat and she was happy; gave me a 200-lev tip, to treat myself. Imagine, that’s the kind of woman that’s going to represent me—didn’t even notice I’d skinned her like a cat.” I realised I’d digressed and began winding in the fishing reel again, “Anda’s fat. Come to my studio when the girls from the Language School or the School of Economics or even the ones from Mandjata try on their ball gowns, then we’ll see if you still pine for Anda.”

“I’ll always pine for Anda,” the fool told me. “I’ll crane my neck toward Anda even if all these graduates line up in two rows outside our house.”

My husband, who has as much character as a worm, said, “Well, Milena, Anda is not a bad girl...” But the sentence hadn’t yet tumbled from his lips when I gave him a look and he immediately shut up. That’s why he and I get on so well, and that’s why I named my only son after him. But I had made a strategic error—the boy is not like his father, he’s a wild cockerel. I’m not scared of cockerels, tigers, or cockroaches. If they’ve named me Milena the Quarrel in Kalkas, a neighbourhood in Pernik where there was quarrelling before there was earth, then nothing makes me jump. To get me angry—that’s possible. It’s possible to make me so angry my blood boils, but whoever’s pushing the wheelbarrow full of muck, I’m going to smear them in it all the way up to their eyebrows. I need seven seconds—after that their authority will have been flattened like a pancake. That’s it. Kalkas’ stray dogs will swallow them as an appetiser.

“My dresses,” I stressed to my son, “are sought after in Milan, they beg for more. You, when you go to Italy—you’ve been to Milan, haven’t you, you bloody Eye-tea pumpkin, no one gives a toss about your existence, they don’t even want to look at you.”

“Don’t speak to the boy like that, Mile...”

I looked at my husband, and he didn’t so much as dare finish my name. That’s why I’ll never leave him—who else could live with such a soft bun? I’m the only one who could cope with him. He knows how I like my coffee—with a spoonful of honey. He tends three beehives, just for my coffee. I’d prise my chest open with my own fingers for him and give him one of my lungs if he caught Covid; that’s what I’d do for that underbaked strudel of mine, because even though

he's a softy, he's a smart man and realises I'm worth it. "She's fat!" I declared. Phew, how that word started smoking in my nice living room. Bad business. But they need to know who's commander-in-chief here. A few days later, I started designing French dresses and that's a job for people with nerves as thick as the caterpillar treads on a tank. My nerves are as thick as the factory that produces the caterpillar tracks. Anyway, after less than a week Anda passes by—stuffed into a pair of jeans; I have visions of a bungalow in trousers. "Those jeans are for girls!" I commented. "You've squeezed yourself in there as if eight girls were crammed into just one leg." Anda didn't say a word and good for her. But her eyes did—they were alive with scissors. Her gaze sliced me into thirty-two pieces. A moment later I went and said something. To this day I wonder where I got such a thoroughbred thought from? "You're all very vocal in your family, aren't you? When your grandfather shouts at your grandmother to bring him a glass of rakia, the cars on the motorway to Sofia get punctured tires. When your father puts two mastikas down his throat and utters two words, the sugar packets in the canteen of the Language School burst open. So instead of annoying a clever Eye-tea saint like my son, why don't you take up singing? You might even lose weight like that, huh?" Well, well, this out-and-out crazy hairdresser heard my words and took my idea on board! She's so daft, poor thing. We live above the Struma, but not in the places that are calm, like my grandad and grandma do. Not the Struma that's like honey in your tea, just beyond the Language School. We live above the Karvavoto gorge. The Struma here has gnawed the stone for two billion years to make its way and pass wherever it pleases her. We're the same—we'll gnaw for a billion years, but we will pass where it pleases us. Next to the river runs the railway line Sofia–Kulata. The train snakes along the tracks. Guess what I hear and see? Just imagine! Fatso had decided to lose weight using the method I suggested to her. I had the urge to collect all the English, French, and Italian dresses from Boutique Iveta and stuff them into Anda's huge gob. She'd perched majestically atop the rock above the Karvavoto lake and just like that... suddenly started singing about Rada: "Dine Rado." The song of a vagabond who wonders if his sweetheart Rada has heard rumours about him roaming from village to village, knocking on decent women's doors ...a nasty song. But that's what vagabonds are like. They go round knocking on doors because I haven't got a rifle to shoot their pumpkin heads. But blimey, how that Anda sang! Wow, what a voice those blunt scissors contained! The Golo Burdo mountain thunders in her voice just as it does above the village of Chujpetlyovo, where the Struma arises. The Struma rises in that fatty's voice. Not just the Struma, the sky rises in her voice, the earth spreads far and wide

inside it. I sit and listen. I get up and listen, and I can't believe what I'm hearing. Not a hairdresser! You, Lord, have created scissors for hairdressers to cut people's hair. You have created the joy of keeping folks beautiful with scissors. And you have given Anda not a voice, but an ox, a mountain, an ocean. You created that song "Dine Rado" just for Anda's sake. Well done, bravo... I saw people come out of their houses—it was Saturday, after all. Even the sun almost emerged, tired of wrapping itself in clouds, like an old granny in scarves and blankets. People listened and looked up towards the rock above the Karvavoto lake. Anda began walking down to the village, and as she walked along our street—not a street but a pothole in a pothole and a pothole after a pothole—stumbling here and there, all the neighbours came out of their houses, applauding as she passed by. Everyone had come out—one with his shirt hanging out, another with only one sock, a third with mismatched shoes. Anda passes by and our neighbours, local folk—each one of them likes a drink—trembling and shouting "Bravo!" The Lord hasn't created as much rakia as the locals from Kalkas can swill. The women, hushed, watch Anda and clap, the men ask her for an encore, the children, silenced, look at her wide-eyed as if they have never seen a fat woman before. At one point, Anda opened her maw again and picked that mighty song "Zaidi, zaidi," then I saw the potholes fill themselves in, all on their own. The Struma began digging at the rock, not towards Greece but the other way, towards Vitosha mountain; the train from Sofia to Kulata stopped in its tracks. Anda sings. Not a voice, but stars stream out of her, paving the way for anyone who wants to get anywhere, filling each head with courage. Anda suddenly stopped and I, the idiot that I am, began clapping, so hard that I nearly broke my wrists, elbows, and shoulders all at once. "Bravo!" I shouted hoarsely. "Bravo, Anda!" I screamed, "you're awesome!" She came to me, grabbed my hand, and squeezed it without saying a word. She shook it before heading down that street that should be called Hole.

"Did you see what that girl did, Milena? Did you see how...?" my husband whispered, but I only looked at him and he stopped. Then he just hugged me. That's when I thought, *You're right, Kaloyan, son! There is a reason why I should be designing and sewing all those dresses for the spoiled girls from the Language School, the School of Economics, and the Mandjata! What a girl, hey, what a girl! Good job I put all this money aside, so you could study, develop your faculties and find Anda. Bravo, Kaloyan! If I and that soft father of yours hadn't financed your studies, would you have even noticed Anda, I ask you? Go fetch her now and invite her round, I'll treat her to a coffee. Don't fuff around, and get a move on! Don't try to be intelligent because you're not. Eye-tea bloody muppet. Off you go, invite her!*



# K

## Zachary KARABASHLIEV

### Wound

Zachary Karabashliev is the author of the novels *The Tail*, *Havra*, and *18% Gray*; the novella *Thirst*; the short story collections *A Short History of the Airplane*, *Symmetry*, *Recoil*; and of essays, plays, and screenplays.

He is the winner of the Novel of the Year awards of the 13 Centuries Bulgaria Fund, Novel of the Year (VIK Foundation), the Hristo G. Danov, Helikon, the Flower of Helikon, *Communitas*, and others.

His fiction has been translated and published in the United States, France, Germany, Poland, Turkey, Russia, Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia, and North Macedonia, and he was included in the prestigious American anthology *Best European Prose 2018*.

His plays have been staged in Bulgaria and abroad; *The Tail* (directed by Javor Gardev, Ivan Radoev Theater, Pleven) is currently running. *Sunday Evening* won the Askeer Award for drama (2009) and has been staged in the USA and Bulgaria, with a return to the stage in Chicago in January, 2020; *Recoil* won the People's Choice award at the theater festival in Wiesbaden, Germany (2012); and *Lisbon* was staged at La Mama Theater in New York (2014).

Karabashliev is the author of screenplays for feature and short films.

In 2017, he founded the Varna Lit International Literary Festival in Varna.

He led courses in creative writing at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski and in private schools.

Since 2014, Zachary Karabashliev has been the editor-in-chief of the large Bulgarian publishing house Ciela.

### Summary

On New Year's Eve 1916, under the foggy winter Sofia sky, two lovers make a wish that the war will end, not suspecting that for them, it is just beginning.

Sava—a refugee from the ashes of eastern Thrace after the Balkan Wars, now a law student—finds healing from the pains of the past in his love for the radiant Eliza—a general's daughter and a talented pianist in her final year of the Music School.

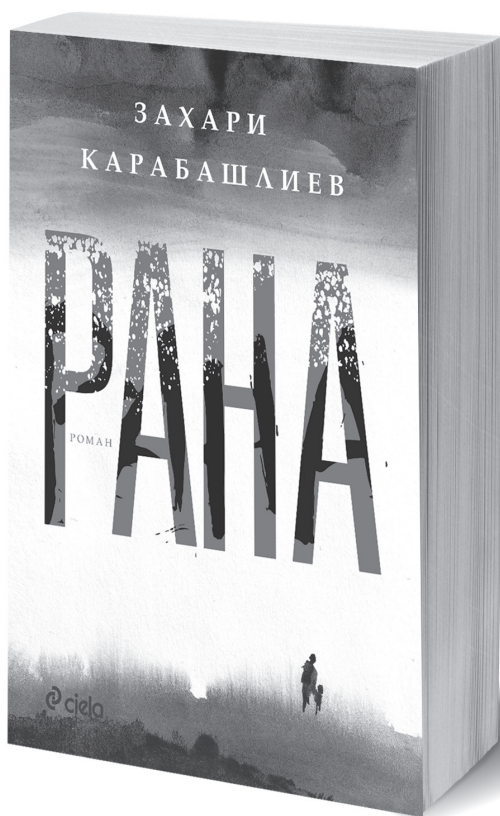
But this love is short and innocent. As soon as he reaches his longed-for Bulgaria, Sava is called to the Dobrudja front to lead the rest of the enthusiastic idealists into a war that should put an end to an unjust peace treaty and bring retribution for the trampled Bulgarian honor.

In the land of Dobrudja, surrounded by barbed wire and trenches, lieutenant Sava Sotirov finds himself the protector of a four-year-old child, in the midst of his own selfless battle for humanity, led by love and a search for meaning.

With deep knowledge and his inherent delicacy and sensitivity, Zachary Karabashliev weaves the story of a Bulgaria inspired by idealism but torn by merciless conflicts, in which personal and national wounds are still unhealed, and some remain unknown to this day.

Based on thousands of pages of historical literature, military documents, soldiers' diaries, memoirs, and personal correspondence related to the First World War, the two Balkan Wars and their accompanying events, the Ilinden-Preobrazhensky Uprisings, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Association, and the revolutionary movement in Thrace and Macedonia, this novel brings the feeling of the lyricism of Peyo Yavorov's literary quests, the deep psychology of the prose of Yordan Yovkov and Emilian Stanev, and the supranational love for man from the works of William Wharton.

Dignified in its humility and deeply humane in its decisiveness, *Wound* is a novel about memory, a lyrical and masterfully told story about the fate of countless people, both domestic and foreign, swept up in the steel whirlwind of wars.



# WOUND

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

**H**e decides they will wait for it to get dark enough. It is highly unlikely the Bulgarians will start shelling today; surely it won't be till tomorrow morning.

He tries washing around the wound, pulls at the rag glued on with dried blood, damn it, red blood is gushing out, should he wash it with water? It's important not to touch it with his hand, important not to infect it. But the wound has festered and the pain is strong.

He explains to the child that he will have to leave her to guard the spring for a bit, and he'll come right back.

Without wasting time, he steals some twenty steps ahead towards the Russian positions. He has to figure out who's where while it's still light.

The only sounds are the dull, rhythmic thuds of shovels in the dirt—the Russians are entrenching themselves, without talking, without giving orders.

He pulls out his notebook and sketches what he can, carefully noting where the sentinels stand, how many field guns there are; he describes the locale, and for himself he maps out a plan from where to sneak away once it gets completely dark.

At around fifty steps from the most distant post on the left flank of the battery is a dell, something like a natural, wide trench gallery, perhaps once a riverbed, who knows; it's overgrown with juniper shrubs, hawthorn, and high grass, and it descends toward the plain. Somewhere up ahead, in this gently undulating plain, lent variety here and there by mounds and haystacks, somewhere in the cornfields are the Bulgarian positions. They have to get to them.

He thinks they can make it in under an hour; he just has to wait until it's completely dark.

He returns to the spring and gets the child. They find a drier place a few meters from the water, thickly overgrown with high hemlock. He makes a den in it—that way they're both closer to the water, but still hidden.

If I can just hand the child over to my side, he thinks, for them to send her back to the rear, out of danger. The child shouldn't remain with a wounded soldier who can't take care of his own wound.

As he moves between the *manguna* stalks (that's what his grandmother called the stinking poisonous hemlock), a voice insistently burrows into his mind—your first battle, your first baptism by fire, and how amateurishly you let them crush you! You forgave a bastard, ate watermelons, led boys, brandished a revolver as if in a school play... How will you be useful to your fatherland now—wounded? Not only will you not be useful, but you'll also be a burden to this fatherland. You'll need to be cared for by medical personnel, you'll eat bread from the state, you'll sleep in a state hospital, you'll be a burden. One wounded soldier is surely twice the burden of two dead ones.

But there is a quiet and uninvited voice that whispers something else—look, you led your people into the attack, you served as an example, and you fell in battle, shot not in your ass, but in the chest. You carried out a heroic feat; your duty to the fatherland is fulfilled. Why not go home for a well-earned rest, why shouldn't your mother and sisters greet you as a hero, why shouldn't they care for you at the Prince Alexander Hospital, why shouldn't you spend time with Eliza?

Who are you fooling—you want to be with her so badly, even if it's in the sick bed. You want to go back home—or you'd sooner go to her. Sooner to her.

\*

The large Christmas pine in the hospital canteen was decorated, even overloaded. The candles had been attached in the most ingenious ways to create the holiday warmth but not ignite the highly flammable branches; long shiny metallic filaments had been draped in abundance from the top of the tree down towards the branches, from which hung wooden angels, tin stars and red hearts, walnuts on strings, every size of bread rings, popcorn, dried apricots and plums, strings of raisins and candies in colorful wrappers. The Christmas tree was encircled from bottom to top by snowflakes cut with scissors into the most fantastical shapes; paper chains of all colors hung down between the branches; and at the base, arranged on two boards nailed together in a cross, were gifts, packages, and baskets, some with names written on them.

The nurses and orderlies continued helping the wounded soldiers take their places, bringing in more chairs, and they'd put several soldiers with amputated legs and other serious injuries on stretchers in the very front.

After everyone was present, the Christmas program commenced with two actors—one a comical mustachioed man, short and fat, dressed in broad-



bottomed village trousers, and the other—a lanky, gaunt man dressed in the “European” style, with a pince-nez, cigarette-holder, and top hat. The two of them acted out unsophisticated gags, something between a pantomime and comedic sketches, and there, far from the cold of the winter trenches, their spirits and thoughts relaxed, the soldiers were dying laughing. Full after the abundant Christmas dinner of roasted pork with cabbage, homemade bread, and dessert, a bit tipsy on rakia and cognac under the all-forgiving eyes of the nurses, they had relaxed their souls and were having fun.

After the comedians, Eliza played the accordion. Soon one or two started singing along, others picked up the song, and some of them jumped up and invited the nurses to dance.

Then came the long-awaited moment with the gramophone that Eliza and Sava had brought—a gift to the hospital from a charity organization.

Not long after, everyone who could dance was dancing with someone. There were not enough nurses to go round, of course, so the soldiers looked about, laughed, and started dancing with each other. A demijohn of wine appeared from somewhere and got passed from mouth to mouth, and it got more boisterous, hotter, and more cheerful.

That evening the two of them danced for the first time.

Sava, even though he had taken waltz lessons with his sister, was clumsy and stepped on Eliza’s toes at least a few times, lightly, but he stepped on them; when he did so, he pardoned himself with embarrassment and grew even more tense in his effort not to do it again, while she laughingly told him that he must relax, but even when he relaxed, he would step on her toes. She threw her head back and laughed, her body got closer and closer to his, and he felt like he was getting further and further from himself, with every spin enveloping him in a warm and unfamiliar enchantment.

Then Eliza put on a record with an English foxtrot in the latest fashion from before the war and started showing the steps to the soldiers, who began studying the foe’s English-French dance with gusto.

Thoroughly warmed up now, they all shouted and sang comically with made-up words, and though the nurses tried to be serious, it wasn’t easy, even more so when one joker had thrown a sheet over his head and danced from couple to couple, supposedly to scare them, until he finally ran into the tree, which almost fell over, but was miraculously held upright by some of the more dexterous patients. Well, a few candles started little fires, which were quickly put out.

The situation was calmed down with the gifts, again collected through

charity; the soldiers rejoiced, with everyone unwrapping them and saying thank you.

And from this so natural joy, a cheerful Shopi village song was sung, someone played the gadulka, and they started dancing a horo, into which they brought the wounded, the sick, and the staff members—everyone stomping, glowing, and taking part with joy in this living Christmas wreath around the glittering tree. Their cheeks were rosy, their smiles, wide, and their chests, heaving.

And no one was alone that evening in this horo. Everyone danced in step with those who had danced the same steps long before them, and they would leave and pass down the same steps after them. Holding each other's hands in this human embroidery with no beginning and no end, the dancers crossed the threshold into midnight without even noticing.

Then the horo disbanded, the dancers wished each other a merry Christmas, they hugged each other, exchanged well wishes, some sat down to rest, and others headed for their beds.

When Eliza and Sava left, there was a thick, cold fog outside.

He walked her home.

They stopped in front of the high wrought iron gate, and their hands stayed joined for a long time.

Her hands in his hands.

Would he not muster up the courage to kiss her this evening either?

She brought her face closer to his, raised her head, rested her forehead on his, and her lips touched his.

The green lamp shade from the second floor was shining gently.

Nineteen Hundred and Sixteen was coming! This was the year when the war would end, they wished each other before parting.

And for more than one million and two-hundred thousand young men in uniform, it really did end.

For him it was about to begin—he had received his call for mobilization.



# Tsanko LALEV

## The Home of the Bees

Tsanko Lalev was born in 1962 in Sofia, Bulgaria. He graduated from the German Language High School in Sofia and Sofia University, where he studied Bulgarian philology and cultural history and theory. He has published two poetry collections: *Heavy Streets* (1988, winner of the Vladimir Bashev Prize) and *Shackles Master* (1994). He has written six long poems and a poetry book for children. Tsanko Lalev writes popular academic books on Bulgarian history and folklore. *The Home of the Bees* is his first novel.

## Summary

In a hospital room, Ralitsa Lazarova learns from the television that her children, Nikola and Yana, 17 and 15, have disappeared near an ancient sanctuary, close to the house she had unexpectedly inherited. Though it may seem crazy, she knows exactly what happened. In spite of her serious illness, she joins the search for her children. In the house attached to an old stone tower, she discovers notebooks filled with writing and tapestries with strange scenes that she has to explore and comprehend in order to save Nikola and Yana. The past never ends—it exists as a separate world. The children are trapped there together with the Perfect One—a Bogomil leader—and his companion the Bagpiper, who came from the lands of the French kingdom. Nikola and Yana overcome immense dangers on their way back home. The story in *The Home of the Bees* is a continuous game between the intense present and the Middle Ages in Bulgaria from the time of the first Asenids and the sacking of Constantinople by the Latins. Even though history turns out to be the same history studied at school, Nikola and Yana discover a frightening difference. In this parallel world, the wood nymphs and the werewolves are real creatures, much scarier and stronger than humans.



# The Wolf's Gate

E X C E R P T from *The Home of the Bees*

*Translated by Rumén Pavlov*

**D**imitar Lazarov woke up early. He could sleep well neither in Sofia nor in the mountains. The nighttime anxiety emerged in his mind and as usual, the wise morning gave him a ready-made answer. It used to happen often in his scientific work, too. He decided that what Nikola had dreamt was the image of a wood nymph with a hunting bow—a fantastic creature Ralitsa had often told her children about. One of the advantages of your mother being the illustrator of several books of Bulgarian folklore.

The first task for the day appeared in Dimitar's mind—to close the barn gates without telling Yana the real reason. The modest rustic room looked very sad, as it was sunk in grayish dusk, and so the strong man tossed back the blanket and went down in the yard with determination. He washed his face and went to look around the barn. He saw the tender wavy traces of the grass snake on the dusty floor. He closed the two crooked wings of the big door with much effort. Yana was not supposed to enter the barn, and Dimitar didn't believe the grass snake would come out in the yard until they had left. Then, in the hallway of the first floor, he started picking up the plastic bags packed with clothes and rags that had been thrown out of the windows. He had decided to leave only the metal frames of the beds in the bedrooms. All the smooth, fuzzy, and frankly scratchy fabrics collected from the second floor would wait for Ralitsa's verdict. He didn't want to throw into the garbage something his wife hadn't seen.

Yana and Nikola woke up too. Their father prepared tea and coffee on the little gas stove. They ate bread with butter and French peach jam at the kitchen table. Nature was bursting through the window uncontrollably, like a dense liquid—cobalt blue and emerald green, mixed with the chirrup of a forest full of birds. It was as if the house were carried in a whirlpool of colours, sounds, and smells. However, the threesome at the table didn't have time and desire for lyrical experiences. They carried out the quilts and the hard-as-wood mattresses onto the porch. Then they washed the whole wooden floor with brushes and cleaning agents while the water drained and disappeared into the dark slits. The smell was like wet wood and perfumed chemicals. Yana tried to wash the windows as well, but they were very hard to open, and the frames crackled as if they would break apart from the tugging. They left them for the next time.

“Have some rest and we’ll be going,” Dimitar said. “I have more work to do. I want to look over the electrical wiring.”

“Is the sanctuary nearby?” Nikola asked.

His father looked at him in surprise.

“That’s a good idea. We can get there in less than an hour. The road isn’t hard. We used to go along the river before, but now there’s a dirt road that almost reaches the rocks.”

Nikola dumped the contents of his backpack onto the table, then put in two light Decathlon trek jackets, a bottle of water, and a small fleece blanket. He girded the big hunting knife with its blade shiny as a mirror on his belt. He’d been proud of this knife since he was a boy. He still remembered the first time his father had let him take it on a trip to Vitosha mountain.

“It’s half past ten now,” Dimitar Lazarov said. “Come back around one so we can leave on time. We can eat at some gas station on the road.”

The brother and the sister could see the mountain peak with the sanctuary above the village clearly in the clean air. At this time of the day the rocks were airy-blue, rising above the dense green waves. There was an uneven road, made by loggers, heading up through the forest. The trucks had carved deep tracks that the rain water had turned into small canyons. The drivers had thrown whole tree trunks and thick branches in the deepest furrows here and there. The mica particles shone like golden dust on the edges of the sand drifts. Yana couldn’t resist the temptation to squat and fill her hands with the soft yellow sand, as though she were a child. Bright green branches glowed in the shade of the strong beech woods as if dipped in sunlight.

Little by little the road got really bad—uncrossable even with a truck. The sanctuary was unknown to tourists and there were no signposts. Many years ago, in a report on a popular TV channel, an enthusiastic journalist had called it the Gate. In his book, Mihail Batchvarov had come up with the new name as more neutral and more literary, and because he didn’t want his birthplace to carry a bad reputation. He and Grandma Vasila were among the last residents of the village who knew the real name—the Wolf’s Gate.

In recent years Bulgaria had opened itself like a chest full of jewels. Golden adornments were swiftly plundered by quasi-collectors, who actually headed the treasure-hunter mafia. They showed off shamelessly with treasures from tombs broken into and robbed. It infuriated Dimitar Lazarov.

“They all belong in jail,” he used to say. “The collectors and their assistants along with the archeologists and the politicians.”

The mountain sanctuaries were harder to break into, and there were no golden burial goods there. Yet the treasure-hunters would occasionally blow up a strange-looking rock, proving their mafia comprised mostly blockheads.

The young people were walking fast—the road was easy amidst the cool clean forest. Shortly they approached the site of the stone piles as if straight from the huge furnace of God. The cooling had transformed the magma into strange shapes, seemingly arranged in a deliberate way and according to a plan. Nikola and Yana stopped before a rock more than ten meters high and split in two by a narrow crevice. The walls were smooth and evenly placed along the entire length of the crevice. It looked like a person had opened or completed this passage in the rock. The tiny Yana went along its even bottom covered with fine white sand. Nikola stopped for a moment to examine the huge anthill with countless black ants. It was raised in the lee of another rock, looming over his head. This rock was wider at its top and looked like a mushroom. The austere warriors were hastily going in and out of their sand palace.

Nikola paused at the mouth of the passage. The two halves of the rock pressed and squeezed the scenery on the other side to a stream of thin greenish light. The young man had an attack of claustrophobia. He took a few steps and felt stuck inside the stone. He feigned a loud, cheerful “Hello,” but there was no echo and his voice sounded feebly, as if belonging to someone else. For a moment he felt as weak as a lost black ant. He crossed the passage with a few quick steps. There were more strange rocks on the other side—an oblong and flat one, like a huge bed, and another one on top that was carved like an arch.

“They used to lay the bodies of the dead here,” Yana said. “Probably the sacrificed ones.”

In spite of the visible human intervention, the rocks in the sanctuary had been scattered by the force of creation. People had only completed the grand set design.

But there was something the force of nature couldn’t provide an explanation for. At the highest point of the peak was the Wolf’s Gate. It was constructed of two vertical blocks, their upper sides connected by a huge rock. Had someone passed through the gate, they would have fallen down in the steep ravine. But only a winged creature could pass through in the opposite direction and land on the meadow that was overgrown with thyme, next to the cut cliff.

“It’s June 20. Do you remember how we marvelled at the word *solstice* when we were kids? Perhaps today the sun will set in the gate frame.”

Nikola had read about the astronomical knowledge of the Thracians that was encrypted in their sanctuaries. Yana was excited.

“We can come back tonight.”

Suddenly they both clearly felt time stopping. Later they couldn't explain what had actually happened—all of a sudden everything froze, as if there had never been time but only a single eternal moment. In the Wolf's Gate they felt something like a movement of the air, a slight change of the light, as though a transparent wave had rushed in through the stone opening. The young people could feel this energy passing through them.

“Did you see it?” Nikola shouted.

Yana had turned pale and fought the panic that was taking over her.

“Hey, don't be afraid!” Nikola pulled her up to him. “Let's go home!”

They went down quickly, bypassing the cut cliff. Everything seemed different—there was no trace of the road. Nikola thought they had taken the wrong path and were heading in a different direction. After all, the forest surrounded the sanctuary in a semicircle.

“Don't worry!” he comforted his sister again. “The village is down there. We can't get lost.”

He turned to look at the Gate and got frightened. Milky white fog, thick as a cloud, was descending from up there. It covered the rocks quickly and flowed towards them. The brother and sister felt the sudden cold. The sky turned slightly pale and appeared veiled. It was getting colder at an incredible rate. The warmth was running out of the forest, as if the Universe were sucking it out through some invisible hole. Nikola and Yana started to run down, but the road with the deep tracks was not there. Nikola was certain they had come from that direction, but obviously he was wrong. There was a forest before him, denser and larger than before. It was incredible, but the trees seemed bigger. And there was something that frightened him once again. There were many yellow leaves on the branches, as in early autumn. A cold wind blew...





# Toni NIKOLOV

## Unforgotten Sofia

Toni Nikolov is a philosopher and journalist. He serves as editor-in-chief of the website *Kultura* (Culture) and the magazine bearing the same name. He studied at the Pontifical Oriental Institute (Rome) and at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (Paris) in the cohort of Prof. Jacques Le Goff.

Nikolov is a member of the International Society for the Study of Medieval Philosophy (S.I.E.P.M) in Louvain.

From 2005 to 2009, he was editor-in-chief of Radio France Internationale (RFI). He is a long-standing lecturer at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski and also a professor at RFI.

Nikolov has translated books by J. P. Sartre, J. F. Lyotard, A. Besançon, G. Bernanos, R. Girard, J. Green, V. Ghika, K. Virgil Giorgio, and Michael Edwards. He also collected the four-volume essays of Georgi Markov and the unpublished manuscripts of Ivan Hadzhiyski.

The Republic of France bestowed upon him the Chevalier Order of Merit.

The followed books have been penned by Nikolov:  
*Cracked Bulgaria* („Пропуканата България“, Publisher: Хермес, 2015)  
*The Bulgarian Dilemma* („Българската дилема“, Publisher: Хермес, 2017)  
*Sofia Remembered* („Спомнена София“, Publisher: Рива, 2021, awarded the Sofia Prize for Literature)  
*Blissful Sofia* („Бленувана София“, Publisher: Рива, 2022)  
*There Is Such a Country* („Има такава държава“, Publisher: Хермес, 2023, awarded the Hr. G. Danov Prize for Humanities)  
*Unforgotten Sofia* („Незабравена София“, Publisher: Рива, 2023)

*Unforgotten Sofia* stands apart from Toni Nikolov's past two books on the mysteries of Sofia. It has elevated his work to a whole new level, where the artistic impact on the reader is even more substantial and much more powerful. While its details reflect surgical precision, the narrative is still purposefully focused, while plowing ever deeper into incurable Bulgarian wounds.

Otherwise, the pattern of the stories is familiar—be it on a rainy day or one in autumn or winter, our narrator-explorer wanders the streets of his beloved city listening to each inhalation as he begins to describe that amalgam of the visible and invisible, the memories, the associations, the premonitions, and the historical facts that make his stories so distinctive and characteristic.

We encounter the mournful figure of Viola Karavelova, who wails through the streets of Sofia at night in search of her missing husband. We follow the tragic fate of the family of Aleko Konstantinov, who lost his parents and three sisters in the space of five years, and we marvel even more so at his talent. We enter into the painful essence of the Bulgarian Civil War, which escalated with the bombing of the St. Nedelya Church and continues to smolder to this day. We feel the shadows of Russian spies who even today continue to walk among us. We meet Rembrandtian elders, people whose last names we have forgotten, people who lived on the periphery of the system and who had the courage to refuse participation in, cooperation with, and servitude to that system.

When we close the book, we realize we do not know—was the author speaking to us more of the past or of the present day?

*Teodora Dimova*



## Aleko's Tower

*Translated by Jessica Morris-Ivanova*

I.  
**T**he sorrow of the winter landscape imprints on the soul as the last rays of the sun fade. But today I don't care for vague longings, cold irony, or biting sadness—conditions that have been so perceptively captured by a “writer flaneur” like Georges Perec. I quicken my pace on Rakovski Street not only because of the piercing wind but also because I have a specific goal.

The impetus began during a conversation with Albert Benbasat, in which, among other things, he mentioned how before—that is, before 1989—they had managed despite many difficulties to put a memorial plaque on the Sofia home of Aleko Konstantinov. The image of this home has long been a mystery in my mind. And suddenly the two halves of reality—the elusive past and the vague present—overlapped by chance, merging into a question.

“I have never been in this house,” I say with a voice full of excitement. The corner apartment building Zadruga, located between Rakovski St. and Dondukov Blvd., had been lightly scarred by the bombing. I've seen a picture somewhere, but I don't know anything about the house next door to Aleko's.

Had the house been preserved to appear just as it did at the end of the 19th century, or had it undergone restoration? And hadn't “the Happy One”<sup>\*</sup> lived in the rear courtyard?...

Albert had shrugged his shoulders and shaken his head skeptically. “We did what we could at the Literary Museum... I have no recollection of ever going in

---

<sup>\*</sup> “The Happy One” (Щастливеца) is a pseudonym that Aleko Konstantinov gave himself during the most difficult period of his life. In one of his last feuilletons entitled “Passion” (Страст), from 1895, he referred to himself as “the Happy One” despite not having the coins buy a cigarette. Since his death, that pseudonym has continued to be used in reference to this great Bulgarian author. [Trans. note]

there, and I don't know if anything was preserved. We just put up the plaque. You're into old houses. Go and explore it." I nodded enthusiastically, but it took me several days to find the time to "visit" Aleko. In the meantime, I tracked down what had been written about the home, which, to my surprise, was not much at all. However, my knowledge was still enhanced in some areas.

As I head uphill along Rakovski Street to the garden of St. Sofia, and then abruptly descend to the Opera House, I think that Aleko must have loved where the home was located. It was undeveloped around here at that time. What a chance "to see the sun rise—that pleasure which only experienced tourists can afford" (from *Unbelievable, Truly, Yet Fact: 300 People on the Black Peak*\*). Aleko described to his friend Naycho Tsanov, how he gazed at the "stunning Vitosha"\*\*\* as he asked himself, "Is there anything more beautiful in the whole world?" What would he think if he saw today's overdeveloped Sofia?

With these slightly gloomy urbanistic thoughts in my head, I cross Dondukov Blvd. and search for a good place to observe the Red House at №1 Stara Planina St., which is not an easy task. Oriented along the axis of the lower street, the home lies somewhat off to the side, dwarfed by two apartment buildings and two surrounding shops. Finally, I manage to reach the little island surrounding the former newspaper stand (the famous Budko that I wrote about in *Sofia History*). The shabby doormat



*The house inside Aleko's courtyard, on the site of the former tower.*

*Photo credit: Nikolay Treyman*



*The stairway in Aleko's house.*

*Photo credit: Tony Nikolov*

---

\* Original title in Bulgarian: *Невероятно, наистина, но факт: 300 души на Черния връх* by Aleko. [Trans. note]

\*\* Vitosha is the large mountain located on the southern side of Sofia. Its highest peak is called the Black Peak. [Trans. note]

on the first floor and the ugly front door with white aluminum windows don't inspire much hope. A sign on the building gives evidence to the presence of a spa center. The state of the door saddens me. In her book about Sofia, Aleksandra Monedzhikova particularly emphasizes it in this way: "When the Renaissance-style house again passed into the hands of its first owner, the archaeologist Václav Dobrusky (1858–1916), being a man of culture and especially appreciative of Aleko, placed a marble plaque with the latter's monogram above the front door of the house after Aleko died." (*Sofia Through the Ages*, Publisher: Fakel, 1946).

Apparently, that's how it once was. But today there is no trace of the original door, and the space above the entrance and below the first-floor balcony is occupied by a commercial sign. To accomplish that, the 1985 plaque was moved to the left as an "orphan"—above the electrical panel. But at least it's still there.

I cross the street and stare at the entrance. There's a box to the right with the name of the probable owner on it and torn notices from a private bailiff taped to it. It isn't looking good. I spot three doorbells belonging to the spa, which I try in turn. There's no answer.

It's not easy to visit Aleko... I sigh and decide to take a detour through the monolithic neighboring apartment building. It was once home to the wealthy insurance company Zadruga, for which the apartment building is named, with numerous branches issuing policies against earthquakes, disasters, fires, or burglaries. It sounds relevant. The company's administration occupied the first floor of the seven-story building that was built in the late 1930s with expensive iron construction. I had seen an advertisement somewhere for this construction "marvel"—30 tons of iron and Fenestar iron windows... with a staircase and columns of Carrara marble. It was time to see if this was so.

What is this apartment building to me, you might ask? Had I gone a bit mad and, instead of following in Aleko's footsteps, decided to track down insurance from previous years? The thing is, I'm looking for a way to see into the "hidden courtyard." According to the memoirs of Aleko's aunt, Prof. E. Ekaterina Ivanova, he lived not in the house itself but in an old Turkish building hidden behind the Red House. He called it "the tower." It was a building from Turkish times built with three floors where each floor comprised one room, making it look like a tower. Aleko stayed there until sometime after 1891, when "the Happy One," financially strapped, offered it to the archaeologist Dobruski at a very good price, and the offer was accepted.

The story of the buying and selling of Aleko's home seems to reflect his whole childish and impractical nature. In 1885, his mother, Tinka, passed away

in Svishtov. Shortly before that, his youngest sister, Lyuba, had also left this world. Pencho Slaveykov, his close friend, described Aleko's parents in a few merciless strokes: "The proud and cold look of the father, and the silent face of the suffering mother." His father, Ivanitsa Hadzhi Konstantinov, was a wealthy and well-educated man who spoke four or five languages and carried on a serious business. He took Tinka Hadzhi Ivanova as his wife when she was 16 years old. And then, along with the early marriage, came the first misfortune in the early illness of the newly wedded bride:

"Bulgarian weddings are associated with many old customs that are performed all day on Sunday, with music and dancing... But my wedding was in January, and I, healthy and young, at 16 years of age, did not pay attention to the cold. Such was the case with the ritual wedding bath, which was attended by all the relatives. During the ceremony I was obliged to get out frequently to kiss the hand of each of the invitees. Dressed perfectly lightly, I then for the first time caught a cold, but I did not think of myself. The slight chill intensified on the day of my wedding. I went to church wearing a very low-cut wedding dress in the latest Bucharest fashion. Immediately after the wedding, I felt the unpleasant consequences of this frivolity, and all my life I have not been able to rid myself of the effects of the then-earned cold, which greatly weakened my body and brought me suffering. (Mother Tinka's account as quoted in Prof. E. Ekaterina Ivanova's book *Aleko Konstantinov in the Family Environment*, Sofia, 1939, reprinted in the magazine *Bulgarian Tourist*)

Accordingly, Aleko was born a weak and frail child. The fontanels of his head never closed and the bones remain soft, as they are in infants. According to Kiril Hristov's story, he sometimes even let his friends see how he had a "hole in his head," if only to keep them from bringing up Bai Ganyo\* once again.

His sisters were sickly too. That is why, when in 1885 the famous house in Svishtov (which welcomed the Liberator King) was deserted, Aleko decided to reunite the family in Sofia. The once rich paternal home was broken up. The money left from the former fortune was used to acquire Dobruski's home that had been put up for sale. The house is neat: one floor and a half with a basement and a large living room. But fate would deal the Ivanitsovi family a severe trial.

On the floor with the large living room and the grand piano, his father and sister Elena lie sick. Tuberculosis runs rampant through this home. This is

---

\* Aleko's collection of humoristic stories of Bai Ganyo, a Bulgarian who travels and commits every kind of social faux pas possible, both in Bulgarian culture and wherever he visits. (Original in Bulgarian: *Бай Ганю*. Available in English: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010.) [Trans. note]

probably why Aleko and his younger sister, Veselina, often seclude themselves in the “tower” in the courtyard, where he suffers, reads a lot, and plays the violin for hours on end. And does he translate?...translating from Russian and French... “Poltava” and “The Fountain of Bakhchisaray” by Pushkin, “Demon” by Lermontov, *Tartuffe* by Molière. These were his first literary activities. And he had to earn some money, since he was fired from his job as an assistant prosecutor at the Sofia Court of Appeal. The hardest five years in the life of the man who called himself “the Happy One” were when five members of his family passed away—his mother, father, and three sisters (1885–1890).

Did the “tower” in the courtyard that housed him at that time survive? That’s what I’d like to find out, but the front door of the Zadruga apartment building is firmly bolted, and I don’t want to be a hooligan and ring all the doorbells.

That is why I am going back to the entrance of the Red House. I hold my finger on the top button. And miracle of miracles, the door clicks open. I’m suddenly in the lobby. The tall and winding marble staircase—slightly weathered—truly fascinates me. The steps are from the nineteenth century. I can imagine Aleko, the over-energized blond-haired young man, taking them hastily, while his plump friend—the politician and lawyer Naycho Tsanov—huffed and puffed behind him. To be honest, I too stop on the first landing. It is just a little too much for me. But curiosity gives me no peace, and I quickly find myself on the second floor. The corner windows are plastered with some sort of modern pattern—no view of the courtyard. Nothing. After a while I ring the glass door to the spa. A kind woman in an apron answers. And so I make my way into the home that I have ached to see for so long.

Sadly, I find myself not in the once rich living room with expensive Viennese furniture brought from Svishtov, but in a long room with all sorts of apparatus, from which protrude an incomprehensible number of hoses and cables. The space, though large, is cluttered with equipment.

“What would you like?” the woman asks, introducing herself as Yulia. I admit honestly that I’m not coming for a spa treatment. I have come for Aleko. My expectation is that she’ll hurriedly shoo me away, saying I’m wasting her time. On the contrary, she seems visibly charmed by the unexpected turn of events. “How interesting,” she says. “No one has ever come here for that reason.” Which, come to think of it, also seems odd.

She informs me that the house is for sale. They don’t know what will happen to them if they have to move. She asks me what she can do to help. I say I want to take a look at the inner courtyard, which definitely makes her marvel. She thinks

about it and leads me to a small room. “But hurry,” she insists, “I’m expecting a client for treatments.”

The room is cozy but cramped. Mostly occupied by a massage table. Mentally, I tell myself that Aleko’s sister, Elena, must have died here. There’s no other way that it could have happened.

“Open the window,” the woman suggests. I pull the handle of the window and see a long inner courtyard with old flagstones. And the most amazing thing—three old buildings are standing on one side. There is no three-story tower, but three small houses, each about two stories tall. Early twentieth century in appearance, they have characteristic plaster appliqué under the windows.

Could Dobruski have added them? The first cottage seems to be the oldest and smallest. “Could it have been the base of the Turkish tower?” I wonder silently, but I hear Yulia’s voice sounding impatient now, “Please hurry. The girl has arrived for her massage.”

I quickly exit the room, but under the influence of what I saw, I decide to share some of the “hospital history” of this home. “Here was the living room that Aleko’s father occupied, and down in the basement was the kitchen. According to his aunt, ‘The household consisted of two foreign women—both Russian, faces reddened from alcohol, and completely out of control. And the massage room was his sister Elena’s room.’”

“That’s really interesting,” the client exclaims, and I sense that the two women aren’t in such a hurry for the treatment anymore. Then, overcome with the fervor of a newly converted Aleko biographer, I tell them the following, “You see, he led people to climb Mt. Vitosha to escape the disease! Tuberculosis was the scourge that ruined his mother and little Lyuba. Then, here, in this place, the disease struck down Hadzhi Ivanitsa. In this very living room...”

“And his sister?” asks the girl who has come for a massage.

I admit, “Hers is the saddest story of all.”





# N

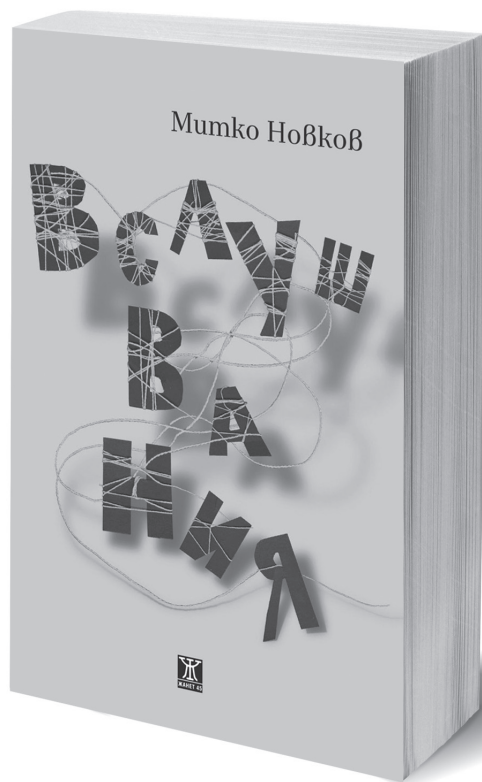
# Mitko NOVKOV

## Listenings

Mitko Novkov was born in the village of Barziya, Berkovitsa Municipality, on 25 July 1961. He graduated from Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski in Psychology and Philosophy and earned a PhD from the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication at the same university. He teaches media theory and practice at New Bulgarian University and Sofia University. He is a literary observer, critic, essayist, publicist, and the author of cultural and historical-philosophical articles and studies. He was a writer and columnist for the newspaper *Kultura* between 1993–2013 and has been a constant contributor to *Literaturen Vestnik* since 1995. He has been a contributor to the magazine *Stranitsa* and many other cultural publications in Bulgaria and is the editor of the “Literary Chronicles” section of the magazine, as well as a columnist for the *Kultura* web portal. Novkov is chief playwright of the Bulgarian National Radio, as well as the author of and presenter for the radio programme *The Silent History* on the Hristo Botev Programme of Bulgarian National Radio. He has won the Golden Pegasus award from the Municipality of Burgas for fiction, the awards in the name of Ivan Vazov and Zahari Stoyanov for operational literary criticism, the Panitza Award for journalistic analysis; the Enlightener of the Year award for civic

behavior, and the Hr. G. Danov award for representing Bulgarian literature. The collection *Listenings. A Dozen Selected Essays* is his tenth book.

Mitko Novkov lives and works in Sofia.



### Summary

The book *Listenings. A Dozen Selected Essays* is a collection of twelve selected essays that attempt to show the “human condition” in ontological, existential, cultural, and literary terms in a single thread. It begins with a text on Chaos, which lurks everywhere in human society and which is, in a sense, the eternal looming threat over the fragile order of the world that we call “civilization”; it continues with an account of “The Colors of Death” and “The Silence of the Wise,” with comparisons between Borges and Cortázar, Borges and Marquez, with comparisons between the writings of Olga Tokarczuk, Dubravka Ugrešić, and Georgi Gospodinov; and it ends with an essay on “The Post-Self,” the monster of our time. The clear purpose of the book is to show how everything in the world is connected, and therefore in every single thing, one can find traces of a thousand other things; the hidden purpose is to make its readers see, realize, and understand that they are the ones who can and should make the world better and meaningful, and not accept events in a fatalistic and atavistic way. In this regard, it is indisputable that it is culture that can save the world, and it is this conviction that guides both the author of the book, Mitko Novkov, and, he hopes, his readers.

# Masters and Chevengurs

*Translated by Dilyana Kodjamanova*

**M**ikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* has yet another Bulgarian edition, this time by Kryg publishers. I haven't counted how many Bulgarian editions it has, but perhaps this is its ninth or tenth publication since it was released in Bulgarian for the first time in 1968 as №7 in the series "Selected Novels" (Narodna Kultura publishers, translated by Lilyana Minkova). In 2020, the book was republished in the same translation, but with a splendid new cover created by Natalia Chaykina. Some time ago, I came across a ranking on the Internet of the most beautiful covers of the novel, and in my opinion, this cover could easily take one of the top spots, if not the first. Not least because it doesn't depict (like many others) the cat Behemoth—a beloved object of illustrators (the cover that took second place also played with the cat; Behemoth has stuck out a forked snake tongue, with an inquisitive and petrifying look), but because it emphasises the devoted love between (a naked) Margarita and her (helpless) Master. However, my initial impulse to write this text did not arise from the book's illustrations, but from the question of why *The Master and Margarita* is so popular around the world, not only in Bulgaria (there were 75 covers in the above-mentioned ranking, and they represent just a small amount of all its publications). And finally: why does another great Russian novel from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps the greatest—*Chevengur. Travelling with an Open Heart*, by Andrey Platonov—not share a similar mass destiny? The latter, for instance, has been republished in Bulgarian only once since its first edition in 1990 (Profizdat publishers), in 2005 (Damyan Yakov publishers). What does *The Master and Margarita* have that makes it, in a way, a symbol of the pretentious literary mass choice (in Bulgaria, the novel took 6<sup>th</sup> place in The Big Read survey, 2<sup>nd</sup> place in Latvia, 10<sup>th</sup> place in Hungary, 92<sup>nd</sup> and 130<sup>th</sup> in Germany and Great Britain, respectively, and in various Russian rankings, it usually takes first place), while *Chevengur* does not make the list at all, even in Russian rankings? According to Dmitry Bykov, a brilliant Russian literary scholar, critic, historian, and writer, *Chevengur* is the major Russian novel of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, along with *Quiet Flows the Don* by Sholokhov. And his sorrowful statement is totally right: "The only true genius of Russian literature during the 20<sup>th</sup> century has remained the most unread."

# 1

The two novels (as well as their authors) had an uneasy fate. They are similar in the fact that they were published long after the deaths of their creators: *The Master and Margarita* in 1966, 26 years after Mikhail Bulgakov's death, and *Chevangur* in 1988, 37 years after the death of Andrey Platonov (here, I consider the first publications in their homeland). It is clear for *Chevangur*: during the times of perestroika, all kinds of arrested literature was taken out of the drawers, so its publication in *Druzhba Narodov* magazine was somewhat historically legitimate. The story about the publication of *The Master and Margarita* is more interesting: Bulgakov's text (heavily abridged—nearly 12% of the complete body text) appeared in another *tolstiy zhurnal*\* (thick journal), *Moscow*, which was in the clamp of a fierce battle between two other journals during the 1960s—the more liberal *Noviy Mir* (whose editor-in-chief was the famous Russian poet Aleksandr Tvardovsky) and the more conservative *Oktyabr* (whose editor-in-chief was Vsevolod Kochetov, a socialist realist, nowadays completely forgotten). Evgeniy Popovkin, another completely forgotten (and rightly, in my opinion) socialist realist, was the chief editor of *Moscow Journal*. And he asked Konstantin Simonov, the author of *Soldatami ne rozhdaiutsia*\*\* and Stalin's court writer, to give him hit content that would attract the attention of the reading public to his journal. Simonov gave him *The Master and Margarita*. Popovkin was clever enough to split the text in two parts—the first one he published in issue №11, and the second, in issue №1 in 1967—in that way, he got more subscribers for the journal. This was a completely successful managerial move—there were queues for *Moscow*, and *The Master and Margarita* became a hit. That was the second literary hit during the times of the thaw, after *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. So, even though it was written later (it is actually incomplete), Bulgakov's novel appeared more than 20 years before *Chevangur*. It must be noted, though, that Platonov's epos did have some partial publications—in 1928, *Krasnaya Nov'*\*\*\* journal published “The Origin of the Master” and “The Descendent of the Fisherman” as short stories—these were excerpts from part one; that same year, another story-excerpt, “Adventure,” was published in the June issue of the journal *Novyi Mir*. And... and that's it. No other

\* The *tolsty zhurnal* (Russian *толстый журнал*) was a type of literary magazine regarded as an important tradition that originated in the Russian Empire and continued through the times of the Soviet Union, into modern Russia. [Trans. note]

\*\* *Soldatami ne rozhdaiutsia* is a Soviet novel that can be translated as “Soldiers Are Made, Not Born” or “One Isn't Born a Soldier.” [Trans. note]

\*\*\* The literal translation from Russian is “Red Virgin Soil.” [Trans. note]

parts or excerpts from *Chevangur* saw the light of day until Andrey Platonov's death.

## 2

The reason for this was that the author, unintentionally yet strongly, infuriated comrade Stalin with his novella *Vprok. Bedniatskaia khronika* (*For Future Use. A Poor Peasant's Chronicle*). According to the Russian historian Natalia Kornienko, who has seen the issue of *Krasnaya Nov'* in which the novella was published in 1928, the Father of the Nations had written in the margins of the issue a number of insults to Platonov: *durak* (fool), *poshliak* (vulgar person), *balaganshchik* (buffoon), *bezzubyi ostriak* (toothless wit), *bolvan* (blockhead). Koba\* sent a note to the editorial office of the journal which could give one the chills: "This is a story from an agent of our enemies, which was written with the aim of debunking the kolkhoz movement, and it was published by communist onlookers with the aim of demonstrating their unparalleled blindness. P.S. Both the author and the onlookers should be punished in such a way that the punishment will be sufficient for them, even with some to spare." It's clear what it meant to infuriate the Master—all doors closed in front of you, and all you could do was pray that the black ZiLs\*\* of NKVD would not overtake you. Apropos, Andrey Platonov was overtaken by them: in 1938, the authorities arrested his son Platon (Tosha in the diminutive), who was only 16 years old; however, with some help from Sholokhov, a big fan of Platonov's, and after endless appeals of the author to Kremlin, Stalin ordered his release in 1940. In the camps, though, Tosha got sick with tuberculosis and died in 1942, but not before infecting his father, who died from that same illness in 1951. Even though he was literally amputated from the literary life in the country, Andrey Platonov did not cease to try to appease the satrap. He even sought an intercession from Maxim Gorky for *Chevangur*, which was basically ready around 1928 (the manuscript was dated 1926–1928). But he was rejected—the author of *My Universities* and the exemplary socrealist novel *Mother* admitted his talent; however...

*You are a talented person—that's undeniable*, he wrote in a letter to Platonov on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1929—*it is also undeniable that you have a very distinct language... And yet given the indisputable value of your work, I don't think that they will print it, publish it. Your anarchic mindset, apparently inherent to the*

\* Koba is one of Stalin's nicknames. [Trans. note]

\*\* ZiL was a major Russian automobile, truck, military vehicle, and heavy equipment manufacturer that was based in Moscow. The name is also used to refer to the vehicle itself. [Trans. note]

*nature of your “spirit,” will get in the way. Whatever you may have wished, you have portrayed reality in a lyrical-satirical light that is, of course, unacceptable to our censors. Given all the tenderness that you treat people with, they are depicted ironically, they appear to the reader not so much as revolutionaries, but rather as “eccentrics” and “half-wits.” I do not argue that this has been done intentionally, but it has been done—that’s the reader’s impression, i.e. my impression. I may be wrong...*

No one supported Andrey Platonov; on the contrary, he was severely criticised in the Soviet press. Alexander Fadeyev (the future author of the novel *The Young Guard*, which was still unwritten back then) was among his critics too. Despite his penitent letters both to Joseph Vissarionovich himself and to *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (the former one was probably not even sent, and the latter one was not published at all). And it was a real miracle that the author barely escaped death during the Great Purge in 1937.

Bulgakov wasn’t a favourite of the critics, either; on the contrary, the critics made his life such a nightmare that on March 28, 1930, he sent a letter to the government of the USSR, asking them to allow him to leave the country. In his letter, he had tallied that out of a total of 301 reviews of his works, “there were 3 positive ones, and 298 hostile and insulting ones.” He was especially denounced for his play *The Days of the Turbins*, which Stalin liked, but afterwards, it was severely criticised by some LEF\* and RAPP\*\* supporters. An anonymous critic from the *Zhizn’ iskusstva* journal (44/1927) was unforgivingly offensive:

*Mishka Bulgakov, my godfather, also, forgive me for the expression, a writer, tinkering in the stinking garbage... But what is this, brother, I’m asking you, your face... I am a delicate person, indeed, but let’s hit him on the head with a pot...*

Bulgakov’s desperate letter remained unanswered for a long time. But on April 18, the author’s home telephone rang. On the line—Stalin himself. Bulgakov was shocked mainly by the leader’s question, “Well, are you so fed up with us?” And he let slip his famous phrase (afterwards, he regretted it many times): “I have thought a great deal recently about whether the Russian writer can live outside his country, and it seems to me that he should not.” After this conversation, Bulgakov was hired at the MAT (Moscow Art Theater), even though his plays were still not performed on stage. He kept writing to Stalin, asking for a face-to-face meeting

---

\* LEF was the journal of the Left Front of the Arts, an association of avant-garde writers, photographers, critics, and designers in the Soviet Union. [Trans. note]

\*\* RAPP, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, was an official creative union in the Soviet Union. [Trans. note]

with him (“I want to tell you, Joseph Vissarionovich, that my writer’s dream is to be summoned to you personally...”), but that never happened—until the end of his days, the Father of the Nations did not summon him a single time. It happened just like that phone conversation with Boris Pasternak—one time only and that’s it, the snake has hypnotised the mouse. In Bulgakov’s case, another thing that had negative consequences was his repudiated play *Batum*, which depicted the early life of Joseph Dzhughashvili. In 1939, Mikhail Bulgakov was informed that the play would not be put on stage, and according to many scholars, it was one of the reasons why his health suddenly declined. The writer died on March 10, 1940.

3

Many people believe that *The Master and Margarita* was also some kind of a request for a meeting with Stalin, but in the form of a novel. Dmitry Bykov (cited above) even called the novel “a message addressed to Stalin”:

*A large part of the novel, of course, is addressed to its main reader, to whom a perfectly unambiguous message has been delivered: “We realise that you’re evil, we realise that this evil is inevitable because there’s no other way to handle us. [...] You are a necessary evil, and we give you our complete moral approval, we gladly embrace you and wish you success in your endeavours. But we need to ask you for one thing—have mercy on the artist. Otherwise, you can do whatever you want in this country, which was given to you, because your method is actually the only one possible in it. [...] But have the courage to save the artist.”*

And if one is to scrutinise the novel, they will inevitably find out that at least two of its storylines are dedicated to this relationship—the authority–artist relationship. Both the almighty Woland, who rages in Moscow at his whim, and the tortured Yeshua Ha-Nozri, who stands in front of Pilate for his fate to be decided, his mere presence presenting Pilate with a dilemma and a headache (“What is truth?” Pilate asks, and he receives an answer: “The truth is that you have a headache”)—both plots depict this relationship. Even the third storyline, when Margarita agrees to become a witch—in other words, to join Woland’s entourage in order to save her beloved, locked up in a psychiatric hospital. Mikhail Bulgakov was writing the novel almost up until his death; he made some final edits on February 13, 1940, less than a month before his death; he was almost blind by that time, and his wife, Elena, read the text and wrote down his comments. He placed high stakes on this book, believing that in some miraculous way it would reverse the dictator’s attitude towards him; hence the words: “Never ask for anything, especially from those who are more powerful than yourself. They’ll

make the offer themselves, and give everything themselves.” It didn’t happen that way, though—Stalin did not come to Bulgakov; *The Master and Margarita* did not reach Stalin. And according to Dmitry Bykov, that was the novel’s tragedy: it was meant “for one person only, yet it became publicly available to the masses.” And the masses fell in love with Woland, Behemoth, Azazello, Margarita, and seemingly the least with the Master and Yeshua Ha-Notri. In the USSR of the 1960s and 1970s, there was a real worship of Woland; even today, people say that on May 1—the day when Master and Margarita flew away to the so-called Sparrow Mountains (Vorobyevy Gory) in the outskirts of Moscow, they organise real Walpurgis feasts: “A novel that justifies evil—we cannot get around that, it contains a direct justification of evil, it is stated clearly inside—this novel became publicly available to the masses,” Dmitry Bykov complains.

[...]

#### 4

I reckon that the popularity of *The Master and Margarita* derives from the subconscious, yet deeply rooted belief that authority is almighty—a manifestation of human nature that believes in the magical power of authority; and I find the reason for the “non-reading” of *Chevangur* (apart from the distinct and genius language of Andrey Platonov) to lie in the subconscious, yet deeply rooted belief that the actual solution to all problems is just the simple solution—a manifestation of human nature, believing in instant magical solutions that spring up by themselves. The former belief never wavers; the latter one—not only does it waver, but it also does not bring us much. The second belief is to a certain extent also a disbelief—human history has proven that there are no simple solutions, that every real solution is a complicated solution that requires lots of effort and energy. Thus, the two novels (setting aside everything else) depict humankind’s passiveness, apathy, and even idleness; but in the first case, this idleness waits for help from above, from the almighty thunder god ruler, while in the second case it awaits help from below, from wild nature.

Voluntarism and spontaneity—we worship the former, and fear the latter...





# Miroslav PENKOV

## River in the Labyrinth

Miroslav Penkov was born in Gabrovo in 1982. He graduated from the First English Language High School in Sofia, and in 2001 he was accepted to the University of Arkansas, where he received a bachelor's degree in psychology, and later a master's degree in creative writing.

His stories won the BBC International Short Story Award 2012 and the Eudora Welty Award in 2007. He has published stories in *A Public Space*, *Granta*, *One Story*, *Orion*, *The Sunday Times*, and *The Southern Review* abroad, and in Bulgaria, he has published in *Zona-F*, *Plamak*, *Savremennik*, *Sega*, as well as in the Bulgarian anthologies *Point of Arrival*, *Strange Horizons*, and *The Caress of Darkness*. He is the author of the fantasy collection *Blood Moons* (Kameya, 2000).

Salman Rushdie included Penkov's short story "How We Bought Lenin" in the anthology *The Best American Short Stories 2008*, and his short story "East of the West" was distinguished by the anthologies *PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories 2012* and *The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2013*. His collection *East of the West*, published in twelve countries, was a finalist for the 2012 William Saroyan International Prize for Writing and the Steven Turner Award for First Fiction by the Texas Institute of Letters.

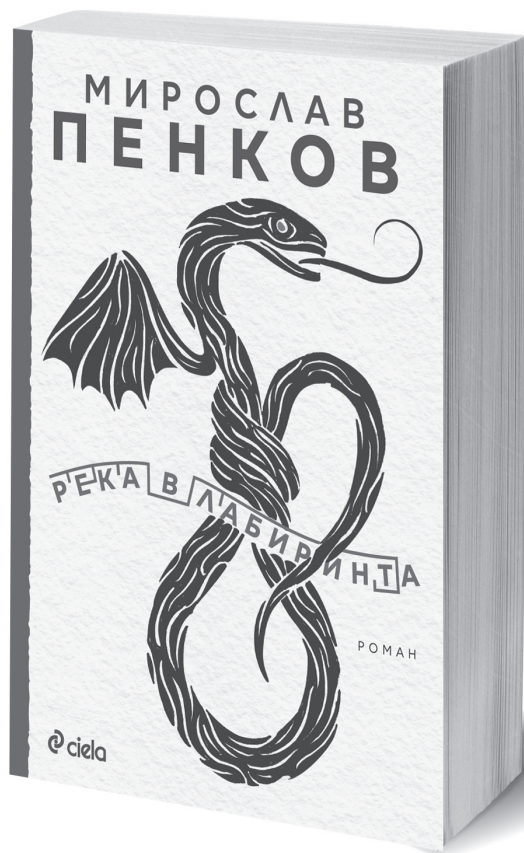
In 2014–2015, Penkov was selected for the Rolex Mentor and Protege Arts Initiative program, where he worked with the writer Michael Ondaatje (*The English Patient*).

*The Storks and the Mountain* (Ciela, 2016) was his first novel.

He teaches in the creative writing doctoral program at the University of North Texas, where he is also one of the editors of the *American Literary Review*.

His latest book, *River in the Labyrinth*, is both a masterful thriller that will impress the most ardent fans of the genre, and a multi-layered and compelling chronicle of the human soul caught in the battle between good and evil.

*River in the Labyrinth* is a novel phenomenon in Bulgarian literature. And on its surface, the Bulgarian everyday reality comes to life, grotesque and bitter, but also full of hope for change.



## Summary

*River in the Labyrinth* is a masterfully crafted story that sends readers to the border between three countries and into the cold embrace of the mighty Danube River, which whirls the darkest urges of the human soul in its deadly depths.

The young American Jennifer Wise disappears without a trace, after a tumultuous night at a popular Vidin discotheque takes a dangerous turn. At the same time, a brutal murder is committed in a monastery on a small island in the middle of the river, and the probable murderer, the monastery sexton, escapes without covering his tracks. Three years earlier, fishermen pulled the bodies of twelve disfigured girls from the dark waters; their fate remains buried by higher-ups in the piles of unsolved cases.

Whether the three crimes have anything in common is something that must be figured out by police inspector Alla Karenina—until recently a caring mother, beloved wife, and a respected professional, who somehow lost hold of her life and now finds her sole fleeting comfort in tranquilizers.

Inspector Karenina's instincts, dulled as they are by her battle with the demons that seem to be writhing poisonously beneath her skin, pick up on an old trail leading to a multi-million dollar human trafficking ring and a particularly sinister medieval order. Faced with these ominous revelations, Alla will have to follow Ariadne's red threads, which will either lead her to the exit of this *River in the Labyrinth* or drag her forever into its deadly snare.

At once a masterful thriller that will impress the most ardent fans of the genre and a multi-layered and fascinating chronicle of the human soul caught in the battle between good and evil, *River in the Labyrinth* is a novel phenomenon in Bulgarian literature. And at its surface, the Bulgarian everyday reality comes to life, grotesque and bitter, but also full of hope for change.

"True light is preserved in the greatest darkness. There, where those who fear the dark dare not go."

# A River in the Labyrinth

E X C E R P T *Translated by Miroslav Penkov*

Whoever has ears should hear. There is light within a person of light,  
and it shines on the whole world.

–*The Gospel of Thomas*

## PART ONE

I begin my song of the holy goddess, and of her slim-ankled daughter whom  
Hades snatched away.

–*Homeric Hymn to Demeter*

1

Two weeks in Bulgaria and she's already sick of the place, allergic to its people. The club is half empty when she stumbles in—California, spelled with a K. A handful of girls dancing without conviction. A pack of adolescent boys, vying for their attention, mostly drunk. White, green, red lights strobing muddily through cigarette smoke so dense the air pulses with the bass. *Ella. Ella. Eh. Eh.* Rhianna coming to an end, then biting her tail again.

She ought to turn around, run back to the hotel. Instead, she's at the bar, ordering a gin and tonic, her third of the night. She drank the other two alone in her room, in quick succession. She's tired of thinking of Elena, of reliving their ugly fight. And still, her thoughts are twisting, looping things from which she needs reprieve.

She puts ten dollars on the counter, tells the bartender, a cute, sad-eyed blonde, to keep the change.

“No dollars. You pay in levs.”

“All I have is dollars.”

“No dollars.”

The bartender is reaching for the glass when a small hand snatches it away. Some drink spills on the counter, on the hand itself. The bartender curses.

Russian. Not the tongue of the land.

“You are American? Tell me your name!”

It’s a girl in jeans and a white tank top, licking her forearm, a small tattoo glistening with the gin she spilled. Petite, black-haired. Hardly older than eighteen.

“Tell me your name!”

She hesitates.

“Jennifer. Jenny. What’s yours?”

“Jenny. Pretty name. I buy you new drink, Jenny. I... how you say?”

The girl tilts the glass from side to side. *Spilled some of yours* not being something she can manage, the girl finishes the drink in one quick gulp.

“I *drinking* yours.”

And she grins—teeth white as bones—pleased with her solution.

Maybe it’s the gin. Maybe it’s Elena. But there is something about this girl Jenny knows she won’t be able to resist. Predictably the accent, soft like churned butter. The eyes, as black as ripe cherries. Something she doesn’t fully realize *should* be resisted.

When the new drinks are paid for, the girl seizes Jenny’s hand. An action that startles, then excites her.

“Come to meet my friend.”

A man is lounging on a crescent couch in the back, where it’s cooler, where the music isn’t quite so loud. A bottle of Johnnie Walker on the low table, half-empty, its black label peeling off. Roasted almonds. An ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts.

“This is Radu.” Who knows why, the girl bursts laughing.

“She always laugh at me. For her I am big joke.”

The man’s smile is warm. Warmth in the way he embraces the girl and kisses her lips.

Then he is making room for Jenny on the couch, between him and Flora. This, Jenny learns, is the girl’s name.

Handsome, this man. In his mid-twenties, like Jenny herself. A sharp dresser. His shirt silk. Unbuttoned at the top, as evidently all shirts here must be.

“Whisky?”

“Cigarette?”

The whisky Jenny refuses, the cigarette she takes. Maybe she’s being vengeful, petty. After all, it was Elena who nagged her for months until she quit. Or maybe she’s finally free to follow her own will.

She chokes, the cigarette harsher than those she smoked back home.

“Americans.” Flora shakes her head. “Are you from New York City?”

“Texas.”

“Dallas!” Radu clicks his tongue, makes a pistol with his fingers. “Who shoot J.R.?”

Laughter again. Maybe that’s why Jenny feels at ease. Easygoing people. Like she’s known them a while. And Flora is so pretty. At one point, while Radu talks, Flora rests her hand on Jenny’s thigh. At another, Flora’s finger traces circles on Jenny’s shoulder, the nail jagged, catching on her skin.

“No more whisky,” Flora says when a waitress empties out their ashtray. A sulking child, Flora wrinkles her nose and this is all it takes. A minute later Radu is uncorking a bottle of champagne.

“I think I drank enough.”

“No be shy, Jenny.” Flora holds the glass gently to Jenny’s lips. “We celebrate tonight.”

Celebrate what? She has no time to ask. Radu is the one asking her questions.

What brings her to Bulgaria?

Alone or with a friend?

How long will she be staying?

She doesn’t want to and yet, she’s thinking of Elena again. Maybe champagne will break the loop? She accepts the glass, and then, despite herself, she answers.

“I came with my fiancée. To meet her parents. To tell them we were getting married.”

“Her parents!” Flora claps, her teeth on fire with reflected light. “And what her parents say?”

“Her parents think I’m their daughter’s roommate. Turns out, she never told them about me, about herself. We had a big fight. This afternoon she drops me off at hotel *Okean*. I check in, cry in my room, then I figure, what’s the use? So I come down here.”

She can’t tell if they understand. But then Flora pulls her in with exaggerated concern, presses Jenny’s face against her bony shoulder.

“Poor Jenny. Poor American girl.”

Underneath the cigarettes, Flora is roses, violets, iris, hyacinth – a trapping, captivating fragrance. Jenny closes her eyes, blinks them open. She can see the little tattoo on Flora’s forearm more clearly now, though it’s difficult to keep the world in focus.

A snake with wings. Its tail coiled around its neck like a noose.

“You like my dragon, Jenny? We meet him if you want.”

Again that crystal clear laugh. Yet for the first time, Jenny doesn't join in. A strange tightness grips her chest. As if the snake is slowly constricting her. But then, the warmth of Flora's hand, the flowery sweetness of her breath, bring such relief.

In time Jenny gathers that these two live here, in Bulgaria, though they are not exactly Bulgarian. They are Vlachs, Wallachians, a different kind of people, a different language and history. Tomorrow, they will be in Romania on business.

“I'd love to see Romania one day.” Jenny's own voice foreign to her, faraway. “It must be a beautiful country.”

“Yes, beautiful. Too bad it's inhabited.”

More laughter, another round of champagne. Then Flora claps.

“I have idea. We go tonight. We watch the stars from the Romanian bank.”

“No. I must get back to my hotel.”

“We take you back after. Don't worry, Jenny. Be happy.”

And suddenly, despite the drinks, Jenny is filled with dread of what tomorrow holds. Elena will surely come knocking in the morning. They'll surely have to talk, figure out in what direction their relationship is headed. And she doesn't want to talk of directions. She wants to stay here, aimlessly light. Listening to Radu's unintelligible stories. Feeling Flora's finger twirling her hair.

“Please, Jenny!” Flora cups her hands, again an overeager child. “We cross the bridge and back in thirty minutes. We have fun tonight.”

Surely Jenny must know things are getting out of control? That she should stand up and walk away? Then why does she not listen to this inner voice of reason?

Crossing the dance floor on their way out, she trips, snaps off a heel. She leans against Radu's chest, while Flora helps her take off the damaged shoe. And after that, the other.

“You no need shoes, Jenny. *You can stand under my umbrella.*”

Another giggle and Flora tosses the shoes away, towards their table.

The music has grown vertiginously loud. Rihanna in some eternal loop, an otherworldly incantation.

Ella. Ella.

Eh. Eh. Eh.

Outside, a drizzle is falling. The halos of lampposts swarm like giant insects in the night. She can smell the Danube, near but out of sight. The sweet, sharp stench of its black mud. She leans against a post and vomits. Flora is laughing and

Radu is helping her, Jenny, climb into a car.

That's the last thing Jenny remembers: the winged serpent, this time on Radu's forearm. The tail coiled so tightly around its neck. And Flora telling her to close her eyes. To close her eyes and dream.

## 2

Three full years before the American gets taken, there are the girls, the three dead girls, and the fishermen who find them.

A dense fog, white like bones, rolls across the Danube, hides the Bulgarian bank, completely obscures the Romanian. Only the monastery can be discerned midriver, a spectral shape whose single light, an oil lamp before the icon of Saint George, sputters timidly in the night.

The fishermen, two brothers in their thirties, have come to poach beluga sturgeon. They've come in a small skiff, propelled by a motor which barks and roars, vomits a film of oil, a cloud of noxious fumes.

The brothers don't care if they'll be seen. The Law doesn't scare them. They've dropped their lines and now they troll the bottom with their hooks. Last month they caught a seven-foot sturgeon. Three hundred and fifty pounds of prehistoric fish they sold to the best restaurants in Vidin. Owned by local magistrates, by the town's mayor, though not officially, of course. It's these powerful men that always have the brothers' back.

A hundred feet from the monastery the line goes tight. The motor catches, the skiff veers sharply to the left. The older brother spits his cigarette overboard and grabs the line. Right away he knows they've snagged a big one. He grunts, pulls, and with a squeak the line cuts deep into his leather gloves. The younger brother hangs on the side of the skiff, smacks it hungrily with a giant hook, prepares himself to stab the fish as soon as it has surfaced.

But what surfaces is not a fish, though what it is exactly the brothers can't tell at first. It's only after they've pulled it fully into the skiff and flooded it with lantern light that they see.

A long bundle of mud-splattered cloth.

Layers of tightly wrapped burlap, fastened with a rope.

They've caught themselves a mummy.

With his gutting knife the older brother starts to cut the cloth. The fog has grown so thick he barely sees his own hands. But then a gust blows in from Romania and the fog scatters just enough. The stench of rot stings his nostrils,



and he can hear his younger brother choke.

Behind the cut in the burlap there is a mess of hair, anthracite tresses which shimmer in the light. He parts them with the blade, revealing a bloated, purple face. And where the eyes should be, two gaping hollows.

For a few heartbeats the brothers forget to breathe. The lantern dances madly in the younger one's hand, light chases darkness across the empty sockets, across the mouth frozen in a silent scream.

"Hold still, you mutt," the older brother scolds and brings the knife back to the cloth.

It is a girl they see in the cocoon, emaciated, fully nude. Black bruises across her marbled chest and belly. The skin has slipped in patches here and there. And in the eye socket, the left one—something glimmers.

The older brother jabs it with the blade and pulls out slowly. A little dice snake uncoils. Drowned, also rotting. They see another in the mouth, its head rested against a swollen tongue. A third snake, nestled into a hole under the armpit of the girl.

Just then, the line goes taut again.

### 3

It's these men shouting that Father Nikola hears in his sleep. He awakens with a cough, peers out of his cell at nothing but fog and darkness. He gasps for air, opens and closes his mouth like a fish, yet somehow manages to drift back to the realm of dreams and spirits.

When he rises to toll the bells an hour later, the fog has dissipated and two cones of waxy light are combing the river. The Border Police boat roars. Divers disappear under the black water, resurface, dive again. The night—it's still some time to sunrise—has come alive with fear. He can taste it, beneath the stench of naphtha and exhaust, the fear of men who've had to face the faceless. It's a taste he hasn't forgotten. Death is near. Death is reaching out of the murky waters, reaching out towards him.

In the next few months both banks are teeming. Not just with police and TV crews, but with ordinary people. Dull little creatures who've come to ogle. Here finally, excitement in their lives. They take pictures of themselves, of the river, of the site where the bodies were laid. They touch the ground as if death has made it hallow.

For months Father Nikola ferries them across to the monastery, just as the

abbot tells him, spectators from the Bulgarian bank, visitors from the Romanian, out-of-towners, pilgrims to someone else's tragedy. He sells them overpriced candles so they may pray for the girls, urges them to buy small laminated icons of Saint George for their own protection.

A godsend, these fools, the abbot says. A gift from the Lord they mustn't squander.

For months on end, these godsent fools ask Father Nikola the same foolish questions in his skiff.

Is it true the girls' eyes were gouged out?

Their tongues cut?

And the snakes? Is it true the snakes slithered hissing out of their skulls, their chests, their—

But they are too embarrassed to utter such a lowly word before an elevated man like him. A man of God.

What is true, he thinks at night in his cell. What isn't. He can't sleep, breathes with difficulty, hardly manages to finish a cigarette, though he smokes them to the nub, a pack a day, out of nothing but spite.

On the morning the girls were pulled out of the Danube, the abbot ordered him to row them both to the bank so they could see. They saw the corpses in the mud where the police had laid them. One girl nothing but a heap of bones. The other two just slabs of rotting flesh. Maimed, disfigured, no longer human.

For months the visitors keep trickling in, and for months Father Nikola ferries them across. To the small island, to the small monastery, then back to firmer ground. He, the old man. He, the boatman. And when they press their coins into his palm, he pockets them without a word. It's easier this way, much simpler. Of course he has no need for coins where he is, no need for coins where he's going.

\*



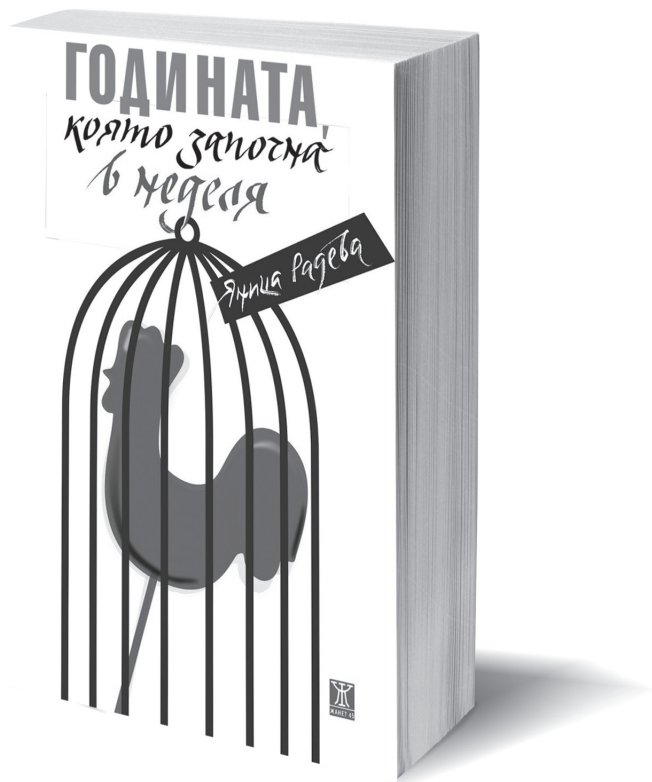
Снимка: Яна Лоцева

# Yanitsa RADEVA

## The Year That Started on Sunday

Yanitsa Radeva is the author of the novels *The Candy Dish* (2011), *The Season of Yoana* (2015), *The Road to Thebes* (2017), and *Hades Sends His Regards* (2020). In 2012, she was awarded a diploma from the Ministry of Culture for her novel *The Candy Dish*, based on a true story. *The Road to Thebes* and *Hades Sends His Regards* were nominated for national literary awards – Novel of the Year of the 13 Centuries Bulgaria National Endowment Fund. She is the recipient of several national literary prizes for poetry and short stories. Yanitsa Radeva's writings have been published prolifically in the foreign literary press, including the Croatian magazine *Poezija* (2009, 2024), the New York-based *Absinthe* magazine (2012), the Iranian collection *Post Soviet* (2020), *Exchanges* (2024) – The University of Iowa's Journal of Literary Translation. She has a PhD in literature.

Yanitsa Radeva's copyright is managed worldwide by Sofia Literary Agency (<https://sofialitag.com/>)



### Summary

The novel *The Year That Started on Sunday* does not have a single main character, as its main character is time itself. The novel follows the lives of three families in a small town, their relationships with each other and with forces greater than themselves. The focus, despite the lack of a main character, is placed on a 7-year-old child trying to make sense of the world of the adults. The story follows the preparations for the celebration of the 50th anniversary of ‘The Great October’ and the chaos that ensues after the celebrations fail, ending, in the finale, with the characters’ realization that life must go on.

The eponymous Sunday holds a special meaning in the text. In Orthodox Christianity this day is usually devoted to communion with God; in the novel Sunday is the day that signifies human hope. The entire novel can also be interpreted as an allusion to the idea of the inverted liturgy: the imposition of the anti-liturgy of the Communist God-Party-Satan and the small forms of resistance coming from the everyday miracle of the compassion between people.

By the end, The Christian idea of becoming “like little children“ gains new significance: those who are like little children are condemned to living a life of imperfect and incomplete memory. Hence the fairy-tale-like representation of the world of the story and the importance of the image of the child as the image of our contemporary.

# The Year That Started on Sunday

E X C E R P T *Translated by Rosalia Ignatova*

19.

The moonlike faces of the chestnuts are swept into the corners of the High Street. From there, they watch the shoes of passersby, polished to look new. Trench coats and polished shoes enter the community center's hall. We enter as well. The choir lines up. We, too, feel like a choir, and soon the amateur town orchestra of weavers from the new factory is going to play. Someone nudges us, saying the factory isn't quite operational yet, but the orchestra is here. Afterwards, we will hear the songs that have been carefully rehearsed for the celebration, and later, it will be the turn of the middle school students and the first graders, who are taking part in this life for the first time. We read all of this on the program poster. It hangs at the entrance, neatly written in someone's calligraphic handwriting. We know everything will proceed as planned. There have never been any surprises.

We can all see that Blaga is flushed with excitement. Motherhood has made her more beautiful; the women from the front rows are whispering as they watch her, while others say her husband has been promoted at work. Their son will have a bright future if things keep going like this, and how could they not? Boyan is a sensible man, and just by looking at him, you can predict his entire life; you can even envision his retirement banquet in the council restaurant forty years from now. Although forty years is no short time, and next year, let's say, all sorts of things could happen, but people like Boyan hardly ever stray from their path.

Blaga is now instructing the students, as are the other teachers. The Lady sits in the second row, to be as close as possible to her granddaughter when she is called on stage. It seems like everyone has come because of her. A few strangers even ask how the child is doing. Has everyone found out she got lost? The Lady can finally smile again and offers one of her looks that speak louder than words, though she also finds words. Next to the Lady, Tiha sits so quietly that the Lady doesn't notice her; her gaze is searching to see if Yoanna will appear from behind the stage.

We all stoically endure the long speech of the town council chairman; it's easier later with Boyan because he's young, though his words are much like the ones we've heard many times before. The lights in the hall go out. Soon we're

going to see yesterday's kids from the sandbox up there. They'll line up in three rows and start singing. We know that the Party is leading us, and it doesn't matter what our children sing; the words are so worn out, and they will stay the same for the next decade to come, though at this moment we're not thinking about that. That's what those people suspect whose hands are now clapping because they are being watched. Even the young people at school are no longer sure if they are being watched. We were all surprised to find out that Yassen had reported his friend Slav for getting involved with some foreign girl at the student camp. At first, we laughed, thinking he must have felt jealous and wished it had been him. But how did he even end up at the camp? We all knew that camp was for top students, and we knew what Yassen was like. Then we fell silent, in dismay. We were grown men with mustaches already; we put two and two together, and it all added up to exactly what it was. *You shouldn't have ratted out your friend, Yassen*, said some of us who had seen things in life. Yassen was assigned an easy post in the army, while Slav faced a much tougher one. But we all thought, *He's a solid guy, he'll handle it*; then we saw that his family had gone quiet. Was his mother ashamed that her son was the talk of the town, or rather worried because she was, after all, a mother? The sergeant major is a bit of an idealist, and certain things are hard to swallow when you're an idealist. Yet, working in the hot sun on construction sites, we are not moved by idealism, and we learn all sorts of things. And it's not out of idealism that we bust our butts doing night shifts.

In the hall for tonight's celebration, there are a few new men. Everyone knows them from before. They were young men with a future, but now they are men with a past—one that has turned them into shadows, and we all know where they've come from. We do a poor job pretending that everything is fine. That nothing ever happened. If we fail to pretend, we act as if we don't remember the person. These men sit in different parts of the hall. They will never speak. They will take what they know to the grave. That's why the soil is salty.

Everything went as expected until it was the Lady's granddaughter's turn. We had come because of her and because of the photo that those lousy interns from the newspaper had been showing us all day. We heard all sorts of things about that photo, and we didn't know what was true. The granddaughter is a beautiful child, slender just like the Lady, and we are certain she will grow into a beauty, just like the Lady clearly once was. She didn't come out immediately when her name was called; she got confused. But the Lady clapped loudly, encouraging her. The little girl stood up like a bright spot in her pink cardigan. She smiled, then fell silent—she forgot the words. It happens, it's no surprise, it's happened before.

In such cases, the teacher gives a hint, and everything falls back into place. That's what happened now. The teacher whispered softly at first, then louder; the front row could hear, but the little girl couldn't. She just stood there, staring from the stage. Suddenly, she remembered, her eyes sparkled playfully, and she began to sing. Just like that, no music. She sang the song they'd been playing on the radio.

The teacher got flustered, the Lady was surprised, and the people in the hall exchanged glances. It was as if it had been written for our state leader, and they wouldn't stop playing it. Were we the only ones here, in this corner of the country, who saw that? Then we started laughing, and someone began clapping along to the rhythm. We didn't see who it was, someone in the back. Then the Lady joined the clapping, and soon everyone, or almost everyone, joined in as well. The more cautious among us realized it was better to stay quiet, because choosing a pop song over a poem about Lenin wasn't a good sign at all. But we remembered we had read the Patriarch of Bulgarian literature. He is still a popular author, and he never grows old. Is he a writer of eternal glory, or are we acting like some characters of his?

20.

Boyan is in charge of the outdoor activities. He speaks with the policemen. People shouldn't be gathering where they're not supposed to, but exactly where the soldiers from the military unit will pass. We must not disgrace ourselves in front of our Uzbek comrades! The music of the military band can be heard from afar, and the whole city resembles a large fair. There's even a fair in the sky. Swarms of birds circle and perch on the trees like lanterns. At first, no one pays attention to them. Then someone starts wondering whether the music is scaring them. More and more people are looking at the sky instead of the square. In the sky, like a drill, a cloud is twisting upwards, so black that Boyan figured it out. Everyone must have figured it out. It smells like smoke. At first, they grumble—who's burning something at a time like this? The smoke is coming from the outskirts—aren't there fines for such people who are ruining the celebration? Then they start wondering what exactly is burning. Fewer and fewer people are paying attention to what's happening in the square; they are talking about the smoke instead. Boyan tries to suppress his anger but his face clouds over, too.

A man from the fire department arrives, asks around, and finds Boyan. He's brief, as if sending a telegram: *The print shop is on fire. We'll have to cancel the fireworks; all the trucks are heading to the scene.* But how could they, in front of our Soviet comrades?

*If you want, bring them along—we'll put on a demonstration.*

*Are you joking?*, Boyan is about to say, but the stranger is serious, and the cloud of smoke in the sky is getting bigger.

Still, Boyan tells the firefighter, *I'll come with you to take a look, and you'll bring me back here afterwards, alright?* The firefighter glances at the sky and says nothing. The two of them get into the fire truck with the rescue team. The firefighters make room for Boyan, and he's careful not to dirty his coat. Someone suppresses a smile—Boyan notices but decides to ignore it. The firefighter's face becomes serious again, almost sullen. When they drive away from the square, they turn on the siren. Boyan has a sour face. It's probably just a pallet that caught fire in the print shop yard. Why overstate it?

As they approach, Boyan instinctively pulls out his handkerchief from his coat and covers his face to shield himself a bit from the smell. They tell him that once they arrive, he doesn't have to get out—he won't have anything to do there. Boyan insists, but outside, he can feel his eyes burning. He doesn't ask the men any questions, and not just because he feels the lack of air. Thick smoke and fire swirl above the roof of the building, and his uniformed companions quickly blend with the others. Boyan stumbles as if in a dream, coughing. It seems that everything is burning. When his eyes adjust to the smoke, he notices his coat is covered in soot, and the firefighters are just standing there. He approaches them, gesturing with his hands. The handkerchief is still on his face, though it's not much help. The wind is hampering the efforts to put out the fire; there's now little left to be done. Someone shouts in his ear and pushes him to stand farther away. Debris is falling nearby, as if from the sky. Then someone pulls Boyan toward two police cars and an ambulance. Only now does he notice them. A firefighter, black as a coal miner, explains something to the policemen.

Boyan moves closer, and he can now hear the conversation. He coughs somewhat excessively, interrupting them. Will one of the cars take him back to the city? He urgently needs to join the delegation and translate for the town council chairman. He needs to get home as soon as possible and change clothes. *We can do that, comrade, we'll assist*, the policeman promises, but first, Boyan must accompany them for an investigation. The officer introduces himself, shakes Boyan's hand, and says with a firm expression that they need to go question the suspects in the fire—*We need a witness, please!* Boyan cannot refuse, and even if he wanted to, who would take him back to town?

The police car stops in front of a Gypsy house. It's shabby and the paint is slapdash. Here, the smoke is mixed with the air. One of the policemen pushes on



the door—it's locked, so he calls out. No one comes out of the house—there's no one in there. Boyan looks around, thinking maybe they'll leave. The policemen have no intention of doing so. One gets in the car and drives away, pretending to leave. The other hides behind the house and Boyan stays with him—as the witness. They wait. Boyan's lower back feels stiff and tight. How much longer? He's getting bored—how much longer will they be hanging around? Then the house comes to life. First, the woman comes out, looks around, doesn't see the police car, and tells someone—then the man emerges from the house. They start a quick conversation, fussing, but it doesn't last long. The policeman appears at the locked door, with Boyan behind him.

The man and the woman freeze, and the policeman takes advantage of their silence to ask: *Why don't you open the door to the law, you blockheads! Tell me all about the fire in the print shop! Yours is the only house nearby!*

The man and woman look more confused than ever, or maybe they're just playing the fool. They can't smell the smoke, and they haven't seen any fire. They have no clue, they didn't see anything; it got dark, so they went to bed. *What do you mean dark—who do you think we are?*

*Where's your bear, comrade?*

*I gave it to my cousin, the Gypsy man quickly replies. He needed it in Dobrudja, they're having no luck with the bears.*

*And how did you send it—stuck it on the train? The policeman glares at him, pushing the door. Let the law in, comrade! You're the only ones in town with a bear, and a bear was spotted near the print shop before the fire. Did you start it? Speak up! Vandals! Off to the station, comrade, to confess in writing!*

The Gypsy man turns pale, backs away toward the house, and quickly disappears inside, while the Gypsy woman seems to double in size. She doubles up like a creature protecting its territory.

Boyan doesn't know how long this will last. The policemen disappear behind him, and he doesn't see where they are, while the woman is screaming, and he doesn't dare turn around. He imagines them leaving him behind in the ominously approaching night. He wants to turn around and look for them, but he doesn't dare. Then he sees them—they've circled around the yard while the woman was distracted by him. They've found a hole in the fence and are now trying to get into the yard. They manage to sneak in. The woman notices that just as one of the policemen has entered the house; the sound of shattering glass can be heard from within. Unsure of what to do, the woman grabs hold of the nearest person. That

person is Boyan. She clutches onto him through the bars of the door. He tries to break free, his coat hanging like a rag.

Later, another police car arrives at the scene. They take the Gypsy woman to the station for attacking Boyan, while the other car drops him off in front of his house. The policemen thank him for fulfilling his civic duty. He nods, wanting never to see them again. It's quite dark now, but there's still time to change and go to the restaurant. But as he steps into the yard, he starts shaking, feeling so weak that the last thing he wants is a banquet. He just wants to lie down, sleep, and forget this day, even though he was looking forward to it for so long.

Then Blaga opens the door. She's been back from the concert with her students for a while. She's dressed for a formal event. She's been waiting for him. She's been sitting at the window, as she likes to do, and has seen the police car. Her skin is pale—is it pallor or powder? Her lips are as red as pomegranate seeds. Boyan looks at her from head to toe, and the words he has prepared to explain everything while driving home suddenly seem unnecessary. Instead, he says something else he's been meaning to for so long:

*You look so beautiful, Blaga.*

The black eyeliner from her eyelids traces two lines down her white face. Boyan pulls her toward him, and it feels like she is a book. He doesn't know why, but the thought strikes him that he must sew the pages together and glue the torn pieces, and finally kneel and kiss her as one kisses an amulet. And when he does, they will become one volume in a single edition.

A lot of work awaits him, and he completely forgets about the Great October Revolution.



# Nadya RADULOVA

## Yozhi Lives Here

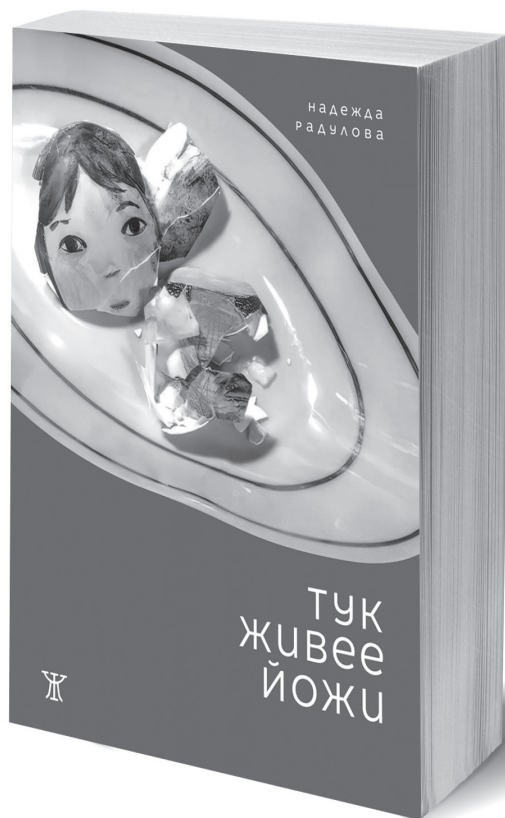
Nadya Radulova is a poet, fiction author, literary translator, and editor. She has authored six poetry books, including *Tongue Tied Name* (1996), *Albas* (2000), *Cotton, Glass And Electricity* (2004), *Bandoneon* (2008), *When They Fall Asleep* (2015) and *Little World, Big World* (2020). The novel *Yozhi Lives Here* (2023) is her most recent title. Radulova has been awarded the Ivan Nikolov National Poetry Prize (2000, 2020), the Nikolai Kanchev National Poetry Prize (2015), the Krastan Dyankov Translation Award (2009), and the Union of Translators in Bulgaria Award (2021).

An anthology of her poetry under the title *The Woman from the Corner House* was translated into Romanian by Lora Nenkovska and Claudiu Komartin and published in 2022 by Max Blecher. Her poetry book *Little World, Big World*, translated into German by Henrike Schmidt and published by eta Verlag, received the Hamburg Literary Prize in 2023. Translations of her work into English, Spanish, Turkish, Greek, and Ukrainian have also appeared in a number of magazines and periodicals.

Radulova also teaches poetry, translation, and literature in various formats. She has been the main curator of the yearly Studio for Literary Translation since its inception in 2019.

She lives between Sofia and Sozopol with her husband Leonid and their daughter Elena.

Nadya Radulova`s copyright is managed worldwide by Sofia Literary Agency (<https://sofialitag.com/> )



### Summary

Yozhi is a child, a mother, a (great)grandmother, a speck of dust in the universe. She's been around forever... for more than 100 years: from the 1970s in communist Bulgaria to the end of the 21st century. Post-war traumas, immigrant stories, domestic abuse, the climate crisis, and humanity's uncertain future are among the many overarching topics weaving through the novel.

Narrating her own early encounter with the world of the grown-ups, four-year-old Yozhi constructs her childlike language inside the pauses between what's said and what's unsaid. In her innocent, fairytale-like yet anxious world, the walls speak, the shrubs in the garden are inhabited by strange fairy creatures, and the shadows of heavy secrets are cast over the family house, bursting into incurable

wounds. One of those wounds is the early tragic death of “Grandma’s younger brother” Marin, whose fighter jet malfunctioned and crashed during World War II.

As Yozhi grows older, she inhabits not just different decades, but also different places and contexts. We meet her as a university student in Sofia who gets swept up by the writing enthusiasm of the 1990s. While crafting her first literary work, an exalted praise of the dramatic love between the aviator and the ballerina, Yozhi comes to understand how slippery and misleading memory can be, how speculative the act of writing always is, and how heavy the responsibility is of the writer who writes about real lives, as they get torn between the true and the believable. Later in life, though herself a mother, a grandmother, and a greatgrandmother, Yozhi preserves the fairytale lens through which she views the ever-darkening world, and that lens provides her with a perspective that differs from the family chronicles and newspaper headlines.

At the end of the novel Yozhi is a speck of stardust that travels—beyond time and beyond her own novel—through cosmic infinity. This last version of Yozhi is able to go back and relive her life over and over again, already knowing how everything ends and where all possible endings come together. This final Yozhi seems to also be the narrator of all her novel’s narrators, and as such, she is granted the right to put down the final full stop, to close the final page.

Dark yet exuberant, Yozhi’s story combines fairy tales, autofiction, and dystopia in a complex and gripping narrative. Alongside the dominant story of a girl as she grows up and grows old, runs another micro-plot, which is composed of short punchy dialogues between the “eternal child” Yozhi and a parent that seem to be happening as though outside of time. These lapidary interludes constantly challenge the rules of reality and the principles of linear narration.

Many of the storylines in *Yozhi Lives Here* make a nod to Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales, including “The Snow Queen,” “The Brave Tin Soldier,” “The Shepherdess and the Sweep,” “Little Ida’s Flowers,” “The Galoshes of Fortune,” “Aunt Toothache,” “The Wild Swans,” “The Little Mermaid,” “The Little Match Seller,” “The Little Green Ones,” and “She Was Good for Nothing.”

# The Stove Lady

*Translated by Ekaterina Petrova*

**H**er name was Siya. We used to call her the Stove Lady. She always went around wearing two coats on top of each other, no matter the season. During the winter, she also threw a large wool shawl over them. She lived in a small one-story house on our street, her chimney smoking day and night throughout the year, just like my grandfather's cigarettes. We kids didn't like her, although now that I think about it, we were all probably scared of her. We sometimes saw her talking to herself by silently moving her lips and waving around her left arm, as though chasing off flies. The brave ones among us tried to imitate her, but only when there was no one around to see them. For her part, she never seemed to take any notice of us, regardless of what we did.

My grandparents had warned me not to make fun of her, as she'd had a hard life. She was a good woman, they said, even if she seemed a bit out of it. They told me she'd come from a wealthy family. Back in the day, when the fascists were still in power, her father used to own a matchbox factory, so he had lots of connections in high places. He'd often take Anastasiya in his shiny Chevrolet to Sofia, to have dresses made by a seamstress, eat cake at fancy pastry shops, or go to the opera. Siya had allegedly been the best-dressed girl in town; she'd had private tutors and two governesses. She used to speak French, German, and English fluently. When the communists came to power, they took her father away and kicked the family out of the large house overnight. The matchbox factory owner was never heard from again. Siya, who was twelve at the time, was sent to live with some old aunt in Sofia. But she must've run away because one winter morning not long after, they found her, almost frozen to death and buried in a snowdrift, in front of her old house, which by then was inhabited by three other families. She was admitted into the hospital, where they healed her frostbitten limbs and her pneumonia, but they didn't manage to heal her soul, which remained frozen. Although I usually made sure to cross over to the other side of the street whenever I caught a glimpse of her from afar, in the rare cases I found myself walking close by her, the sight of her eyes always gave me the chills: blue fragments swimming in pinkish watery sclerae. That arctic gaze streamed from a snow-white face nestled amidst a bush of pale orange hair sprouting all around it.

That summer I'd unwittingly become part of the neighborhood boys' gang. My only girlfriend had moved to another town, and I didn't get along with any of the other girls especially well. Truth be told, I wasn't particularly excited about the boys' games either. Playing blow darts frightened me, especially when the others added pins to their paper darts. Football bored me. The rest of the ball games required taller players, so I had no chance to shine. That left card games or playing hide-and-seek late at night. The time was long gone when I could convince the children to put on a theater play and charge the adults 50 stotinki for tickets, which was enough to buy us all sweets at the pastry shop the following day. What I liked best now were the moments between the games or those late nights when we sat on the pile of firewood at the end of the street and chatted. I was pretty good at telling scary stories, even altering my voice for greater impact.

On one such late evening in July, it must've been quite a bit after ten o'clock, as most of the windows along the street had already melted into the surrounding darkness, a bunch of us were sitting on the pile of wood, eating sunflower seeds: myself, Pavel, Koko, Teki, and Jeki. The latter two were brothers, although they didn't resemble each other at all. At fourteen, Pavel was the oldest kid in the neighborhood and he already thought the rest of us were a big drag. That put me on edge since I had a crush on him, although I wouldn't even admit it to myself. I kept trying to get his attention by using expressions I'd overheard from the adults or twisting things around and pushing the truth in whatever direction suited me. But the truth isn't a ball you can just roll whichever way you feel like. As anyone who's ever tried to give it a kick and send it far off knows, it's bound to eventually come back with even greater force and slam right into your face.

That night, in an effort to impress Pavel, I decided to recount everything I'd heard about the Stove Lady from my grandparents, naturally with some embellishments of my own. According to the version I made up, after nearly freezing to death in front of her family's old house, Anastasiya had become, for all practical purposes, fireproof. That meant she was able to withstand incredibly high temperatures. As evidence, I cited the little stone brick that our weirdo neighbor regularly placed on top of the stove in her house until it became red hot, then wrapped it in a newspaper or an old wool rag and used it to warm her feet and hands, even carrying it around with her when she went out on cold winter days. Once, when I was sick with a cold, my grandma had the idea to borrow the stone brick from the Stove Lady. She made me get out of bed and stand on top of it for as long as I could. I lasted less than three seconds. No such torture was mentioned in any of my books—not those with the stories about cowboys and

Indians, nor the Soviet novels about child heroes that were mandatory reading at the time. I kicked the stone brick aside and pulled off my wool socks, terrified that the skin on the bottoms of my feet would come off with the socks. The skin stayed in its place, but from that moment on, I'd become convinced that the Stove Lady had a certain connection, if not quite with the Ghost of Llano Estacado, then at least with the fire breather from the local circus troupe, who at the time pretty much summed up the extent of my knowledge about superheroes.

The curious thing was that Pavel, Koko, Teki, and Jeki fell for my story, which I hadn't expected at all. Perhaps it was my personal experience with the hot stone brick—an indisputable fact that my grandmother could confirm—that did the trick. And besides, they'd all already seen the Stove Lady through her small ground-floor window as she sat stooped over the black iron stove, holding something wrapped in a newspaper in her lap.

"Do the firemen at the station down the street know that she's fireproof? They should call her in when there's a fire, so she can get people out of the burning buildings," Koko said.

"The fire station manager is my godfather," Jeki chimed in. "Maybe I should let him know."

"Yeah, right," Teki said with a sneer.

"You're all such little fools! Of course they know about it. If not at the fire station, then at the militsiya for sure. The militsiya knows everything. If they haven't called her in, they surely have their reasons," Pavel said with a kind of certainty that all but suggested he worked at the militsiya himself. "And you, Yozhi, can you get your grandma to borrow the stone brick again for a couple of days, so we can examine it more closely?"

"How would that work though? Last time I raised hell about how hot it was, and now you want me to ask for it again, just for the hell of it?"

"What's the big deal? You can tell your grandma you've got the runs and just hold the thermometer over the hot plate when she's not looking."

"Totally! My mom always falls for that trick!" Jeki said.

"Yeah, right," Teki said, sneering once again.

I didn't make any promises. I had no desire to participate in the shenanigans of the boys' gang, as much as I wanted to impress Pavel. Eventually, the subject of the Stove Lady and her supernatural abilities was dropped, so the days continued going by in their usual manner, winding up in the cool late nights with some chitchat on top of the pile of wood at the far end of the street.



But it so happened that I really did get sick. It was probably some kind of summer virus, because all the kids in the neighborhood got it in the span of a single day, including Pavel, Koko, Teki, and Jeki. I was burning up with a fever, dying of cold, and shivering uncontrollably, all the while the temperature outside was 35 degrees in the shade. Everyone at home went to work, except for my grandmother who fussed around me. Thermometers, wet compresses, crushed aspirin mixed with sugar and dissolved in a spoon of water, the nightmarishly green Analgin-quinine tablet ground to a powder and mixed with yogurt that nevertheless retained the bitterness of a strong Aztec poison. None of it helped. After hours of unsuccessful treatment, I was still in bed, shivering and spitting out all the medicine that entered my mouth in the form of tablets, drops, tinctures, and infusions. My grandma finally slapped her forehead and said:

“Stay here, Yozhi, I’ll go and borrow Siya’s stone brick! I can see her chimney’s smoking, so it must already be heated.”

The thought of the bare bottoms of my feet on top of the red-hot stone brick caused my temperature to immediately go up by at least a few more degrees. I even considered slipping away while my grandma was gone and hiding somewhere around the house, but a similar move from a few months ago hadn’t gone especially well, so I decided to stay put and wait. Swarming around my head were all kinds of images: human skin belonging to no one knows who, frozen in the snow and peeling off in large sheets, then the morello cherry tree blooming in our yard in the spring and releasing snow-white blossoms into the air, which turn out to be flakes of soot, and the whole room smelling of smoke, causing my eyes to tear up. I felt so unwell that I completely lost track of time and how long my grandma was gone. But as soon as I saw her standing in the doorway, I knew something was wrong. Her face, her arms, and her dress, which had been covered in a pattern of small flowers, had all turned grayish black. Her glasses had as well, so I wondered whether she could see anything through them at all. Her hands were shaking, her lips were moving rapidly, but either no sound was coming out or the fever had muffled my hearing. The air in the room had turned grainy and thick while the contours of all the objects vibrated and emitted a barely audible buzzing sound, although its source could have also been my ear infection. All of this stretched over several moments, as if in a freeze-frame. Then the room cleared up, motion was restored, and my grandma rushed over to the window to close it. She leaned over me and screamed:

“It’s burning, Yozhi, Siya’s house is on fire!”

At that instant, my ears unclogged and I heard the sirens in the distance.

I don't have a clear recollection of the days and weeks that followed. I know that all of us kids recovered quickly but didn't go out to play for a long time afterward. Once the unfortunate incident had gradually faded out of our dinnertime conversations, once the smell of smoke had been completely forgotten even by the late-blooming roses in the garden, and once the thrice-washed curtains, tablecloths, and bedsheets had brought the innocent confidence back into our bodies, the only thing that remained were my own thoughts and the occasional escaped sigh as I crossed the living room where the grown-ups sat, crowded around the black-and-white TV in expectation of seeing the little that could be seen on the screen in those days. After the incident, my crush on Pavel disappeared and the boys' gang slowly fell apart. I missed Jeki and Teki, who left the neighborhood suddenly when their parents got jobs in a different town. I didn't even get to say good-bye to them. Every once in a while I would ask Pavel for their new address or phone number, but he never got around to giving them to me.

When the investigation of what had caused the fire ended months later, various contradictory rumors started going around the neighborhood. Some said it had been caused by the Stove Lady herself, since she really did like playing with fire—that hadn't been the first time a burning coal had flown out of the stove and set fire to the rug or the old blanket that she used to cover herself. According to those stories, she'd dozed off, and when she woke up everything was already in flames. Other versions claimed that someone who held a grudge against her had thrown gas-soaked rags, followed by a burning torch, through her window. But why would anyone hold a grudge against the Stove Lady? She was just crazy, not evil. Others yet suspected that it was the ghosts of the erstwhile matchbox factory workers who had come to get revenge for the terror they'd endured under the Stove Lady's father back in the day. The few of us who could guess what had actually happened, although we couldn't be certain, had wordlessly come to an agreement to stay silent about it forever. That silence gradually made us grow apart—Pavel, Koko, and me. By the time the following summer came, we passed one another on the street with nothing more than a mere "Hey, how's it going." On the inside, all three of us knew we were not innocent, even if for no other reason than that late-night conversation on top of the pile of firewood. But just as secretly we rejoiced, as things now seemed to have been both clarified and worked out for the best. Even though the fire had basically razed her house to the ground, the Stove Lady had managed to get out of the flames unscathed,

without a single scratch or burn. After the incident, the municipality had given her permission to move into one of the floors of her old house in the center of town, where—as rumor had it—she'd finally warmed up and stopped lighting the stove in the summer or waving her arms around on the street.

I never found out what happened to Jeki and Teki after they moved away. For a while afterward, I kept dreaming of Jeki, or rather of his voice, which conveyed something important, immediately followed by Teki's voice and his favorite, "Yeah, right!" In the end, they really didn't resemble each other at all, even though they were brothers.



# S

## Vasil SLAVOV

### Stanzas of Blood

Vasil Slavov was born in Sofia. He graduated in English Philology from Sofia University Kliment Ohridski. His first poetry anthology was published in 1989. That same year he left for the USA, where he did graduate work in literature, literary criticism, and creative writing. Up to his departure he published poetry, translation, and critical articles in most of the literary publications in Bulgaria.

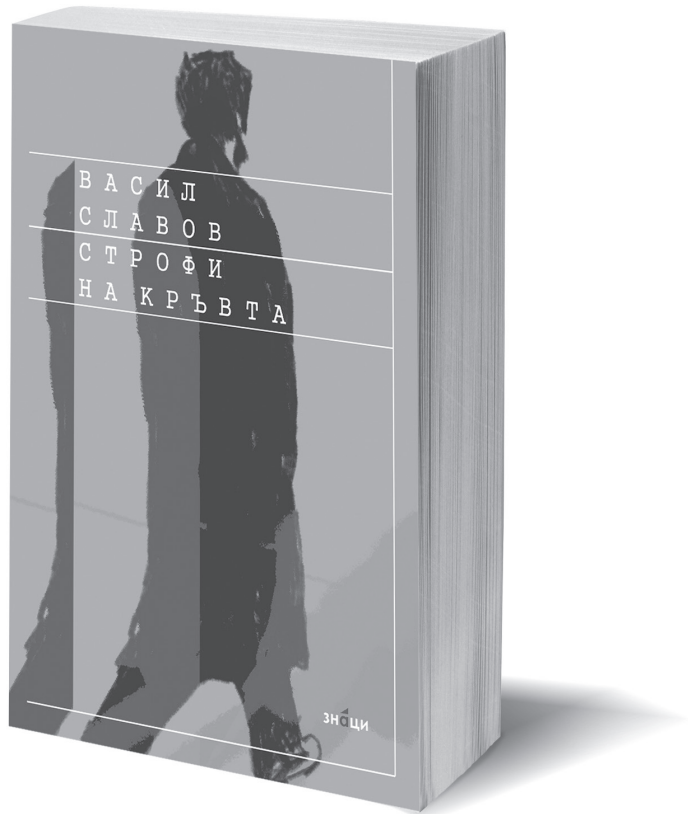
He is the author of several books of poetry and essays and the recipient of prestigious literary prizes and awards. He has given English language presentations of his poetry in the USA and UK. He lives with his family in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

## Summary

A return after long years spent away from the soil of the motherland. Is it possible? Where do they remain—what's been transferred and recreated? An attempt at deciphering the stanzas of blood. Elevating memories that retain breath and fragmentation. Thought and acceptance of guilt and the gnawing conscience of the abandoner. The crossing of nomadic life and settlement. More accurately sorrow, arrogance cast aside...

The author tries to give an answer to these questions.

And in the words of the writer Neda Antonova about the book, “And you breathe memories: fewer and fewer from here, but even fewer from there. Here—beautiful to the heavens. There—free to the heavens. And even when your return is a gift, you know that there is no return. And this book... Whatever title it carries, ‘Blood’ will always be read.”



# Stanzas of Blood

*Translated by Christopher Buxton*

“Apparently they can learn nothing save through suffering, remember nothing save when underlined in blood —”

William Faulkner

**H**é'd left many years ago. Hé'd left behind him a forest and a sick mother. Excuses could be found. The first wave of terrifying depopulation. Then he still saw people. Then he talked. Today now it means nothing. He knows nobody. Nobody knows him, His town was left wounded. In time the town changed and forgot. The town brushed away its refugees. Like an old man brushes dandruff from his lapel. With irritation and disgust. It's easiest to forget. It's convenient to raise Cain against those who haven't a shadow to cast. Acuity and a twisted cliché which confirm your own presence. We freed up spaces. We took them. We requisitioned. Newcomers from hamlets and settlements. But the choice was ours, wasn't it.

The first thing he sensed, before distinguishing smells, was the taste of the unknown spice—a strong but not irritating smell. The subway train had hiccupped with its rusty doors. Back then. The yellow-smoggy light was hiding the numbered street signs, which hé'd read about in novels. And hé'd read all the novels about this town. Everyone had read all the novels about this town. They bought the books from some shop with windows dampened by the Vitosha rain and read. They waited in lines, so they could read, they even went in the pre-dawn. They read. And read.

Yellow-smoggy light... a taste of the unknown, which scratched at the walls in this subway, lined with light almond tiles. So alien, in spite of the books read. His shoes pinch, then they lift him on to the stairs, which would lead him into the town's maw.

The town of all towns.

Later, in some poem, in some literary program, hé'd written about the needle of the Empire State building. The next day hé'd sat with Atanas and Lyubo. And Lyubo had said, “Write now, Vassy. While the urge is strongest, while what's

newest strikes the eye. Later, later you'll get used to it. Now's the best time to decipher."

And the hunger was good. The best. And the shadows, and this steam, the steam of New York at that time, the smell of narcotic piss in the corners... when spring was coming... bursting out.

Global hunger, global poverty. Everything had to start from the beginning. *You have to be Johnny on the spot to get something in New York*, according to some cynical fuck. Correctamundo. And what could you get in New York? Twenty-five cents, which always dropped from the broken telephone on the corner of St. Marks Plaza. On the threshold of your thirties. The springtime, romantic, narcotic piss-covered town. Yes, at the beginning of the 90s, New York stank. Hell's Kitchen was Hell's Kitchen, on Eighth and Ninth there were warehouses and shit. You didn't go down First and Second till cock-crow. And in Brooklyn there were no cocks.

A delicacy.

On Second they sold chairs for two dollars apiece. Like those office ones, where the bottom part of their legs is always scraped. His father took one. He took one. Atanas had to sit on the first one because he had nowhere to sit, and some antediluvian Apple had to be shifted onto to the second, where he would write his books. It was sunny. We dragged the chairs to some room. Inside it was dark. And outside. Sunny! Then...

Then Atanas wrote his books, and they gave him the Stara Planina medal—First Class, but then he sold it on Slaveikov Square for a few leva and told them to fuck themselves. It was pretty much like that. Exactly like that.

I forgot what stop we got off at then. Dark. My daughter cuddled close to me. She looked at me. She bent over and threw up. I hugged her. Just a little further, kiddo. Just a teeny bit further. We had taken the subway from the airport. Three suitcases with us. We hadn't the money for a taxi. It was good that the child had a cardigan. Just a little bit further, kiddo. Here, it's just opposite. And tomorrow we'll go... Her eyes are somehow far away. Welcome to New York, Ellie. In your emigration where your dad has led you.

Ellie's first evening was in Greenwich Village. In Vanzetti's studio. Here's your key, you stay here as long as you want, I'm off. Don't worry. As much time as you need... no less! Vanzetti's studio, where they had scraped their backs, where the emigrants had slept on the ground, writers, artists, together. Before setting out, B said, "When you get there, call Vanzetti and send Milcho this picture, it has to

be known.” And in the picture, a Turkish boy beaten up in the so-called National Revival Process. “I have called. Now Greenwich Village is sheltering my daughter.”

The rain paints itself on high. First it is lost in fog. It’s looking for itself. It lifts its swaddling. And it falls. The escaping clouds help it. And they are so weak. Flying clouds. Thrown in handfuls. It falls through the gaps in the clouds. Then it sees the lakes. Their huge mirrors, which shone through the green land. And the green land reached the sea. It saw the lines of the shore, marked out in long spirals. Breathlessness. After these hours.

Yes, the lakes below were breathless. They were enticing in the sun. Some new and unknown affiliation. An imminent introduction? This green and powerful land.

Her lakes and her sky. America. Oh, my God!

High up somewhere light splashed. Everything thundered. Streets, cars, taxis, people, dogs... thundered. And this thunder rose up, separated itself in the brown walls of buildings that took away the sky and dropped its load again and again, with its unprotected echo below, carrying away the wind, muddling steps, smells, breath... breathless, breathless...

New York. A sketch. Uselessness you’ve passed through. What is left for today? The elms of Central park. Their huge branches reaching out. Maybe the town too wanted to fly.

Second Avenue, always somewhere on Second avenue, through this hunger, through this wind, in this town—there on Second Avenue, in the time when, in ’76, I think in some diner, Atanas met Kurt Vonnegut, talked about his book and the book title from a poem by K. Pavlov, some bats, no, nightingales in the Western Park. Some kind of bats, and when I met K. Pavlov for the first time, the Doberman smiled and K. Pavlov smiled and we talked about poems and K.P. was cool. Really cool. Tolerant. Yes I talked about Second Avenue. My father sat down for a bagel on Second avenue, chatted with Kurt Vonnegut, and Vonnegut wrote him a recommendation and said nice things about what he’d read, then, when... at the beginning of the ’90s, I reckon, we walk up Second avenue, Katerina and I, we always have to be onwards and upwards, don’t we. Haven’t we come to America to be onwards and upwards, and the wind threads, stabs, fuck it, and I say to Katerina, do you remember what hunger there was here, and she laughs, but our bodies rang back then, she says, not a spare gram; and our teeth chatter and we walk up Second through some pre-Christmas aromas from street carts, falafel, fumes, chattering, rattling, sirens, clatter, car-horns—stop—we enter and



buy, for the first time we'll treat ourselves, we'll buy something more than marked down pretzels from St. Marks—four for a dollar, and I bought a little jacket for Katerina with change from portering in Washington, but it was no good, thin, pathetic, and she froze in it. We enter. Some hole in the wall, we order chicken wings and two Rolling Rock beers, and then Rolling Rock is brewed thirty four miles from Pittsburg in Latrobe and we went there with Gary and Roy, when we opened the shops—a green bottle with a little horse, yes, and in Latrobe, Fat Jimmy opened the shop. Yes, there's two wings apiece, a bit of celery, and we're in fifteenth heaven, in New York there are more heavens, because it's warm for a moment and our spirits are strung into pre-Christmas, and they're singing, fuck it, nightingales—bats—that movie doesn't exist. That's Second Avenue, later, later when, these days we probably walk by the river, beautiful weather, yellow, somehow from yellow bushes, our daughter plays with her daughter. East End Street. We set off in this sunny yellow, and two blocks up, don't we have to be onwards and upwards, we cross Second. The diner from '76 isn't there, the hole in the wall isn't there from '89, there's a smiling baby who crosses Second and one beautiful yellow day...

New York. Some attic and a bath in the middle of the kitchen. Filthy stuff. Mice jumping about. I start as security in Capezio. In the Village. MacDougal. I sit in a wooden booth and read William Burroughs. We even thought of translating him back then. I forgot if we published something. But his *Naked Lunch* was too naked for me. But who asks me. I check in, I check out, this Capezio is a fashionable place with ballet slippers and photographs of Baryshnikov. Ballet slippers. But I understand them, these tricks. From the Sofia Opera. The trick is to be prepared. Even so, this isn't two steps forward, one step back.

There is the arch opposite. There is no ceremony in passing through it. Murky. Emigrant stuff. An elation which quickly subsides. The start of Fifth Avenue. Fifteen minutes before closure Lance plays this one and the same song. Droolingly sentimental. But it strains the strings of his Kazak soul. Somehow delicate. Only the sun has shifted in a different way. I look outside and think of what I have to do, what I can do, after I hit the key and let down the metal netting. Maybe I have to go to Lyubo, so we can continue typing up his texts on that clattering Erika typewriter brought over from Sofia. He dictates, I batter away at the letters rubbed out by Sofia fog, a wonderful book is being born... Or should I get my materials ready in those huge yellow envelopes, sent to the old town. Huge yellow envelopes, which never get there in time. Maybe I'll simply

drop down to the damned Pizzeria at St. Marks and I'll whack off four games on the red box, where you shoot with a plastic pistol and alarmed figures shriek to the heavens. Ginsburg won't be in the bookshop there. While my daughter falls asleep somewhere I'll play games; while someone needs me I'll play games.

Pyuu, pyuu...

St. Marks—down on east 7<sup>th</sup>—Kerouac's flat, then McSorley's ale house, opposite—the theaters for unemployed and amateur actors, further on the campus for New York university, with that small garden where I take my wife, while we wait for our child.

Pyuu, pyuu ...

Maybe someone needs me.

The café is Reggio, still on MacDougal, a little up from Capezio. We choose this café. For our Sunday meetings, for meetings in the moments which we can spare, and they aren't many. Torn minutes. Because there's no frivolity and free-living in New York. But even so there are some hours left over, in some post-lunchtime Sunday. I don't know, I don't remember winter days there, rather it was warm, late summer, some kind of autumn. We chose this café. Why there, exactly, I have to ask Vanzetti. Nasko's not around. Nasko hasn't been around for a long time. Nasko left early, he was late for a check-up, he was late for his heart, on his own, somewhere. But this is a lot, a lot after our meetings, those meetings in the post-lunch in Reggio. That café was named deliberately. Small tilting tables, walnut-British interior, photographs, portraits, European aromas.

Vanzetti finished *The Seeds of Fear*. Vanzetti is the first who wrote about the camps and the terror of Belene. His childhood returns. His path of suffering. He finds time and writes his book. And Nasko, Nasko talks about Plovdiv. Nasko is always talking only about Plovdiv, and Vanzetti and I are ashamed that our Sofia-Pernik loyalty has broken down. Nasko is in New York, but Nasko is in Plovdiv. When? When for the one hundred year anniversary for the Plovdiv Art School, I think, they give an exhibition to Nasko. And he does it. Then they come, these George Yordanov, Pavel Pisarev moments, that puffed up Communist bloodthirstiness and fury. Nasko is discarded. Then he leaves all his pictures, tells Plovdiv to fuck it and comes to America. He comes here, but his soul remains under those hills. And we josh him. Well now, to be loyal to Pernik, to Sofia is one thing, to Plovdiv—it's quite another! And we laugh. It's still our time, after lunch, between some two rivers, beyond some ocean.

Later, later in Pittsburg I find out that Vanzetti and Nasko carry on meeting at

Reggio, sometimes my father comes down from upstate New York and joins them, Mike “the Elephant”—him as well. Friends come, acquaintances, newcomers.

Now I think—no, there were no winter extensions to these meetings at Reggio, because it was and remained the slow autumn post lunch-time.

Or the post-summer, post-lunchtime.

Did we lose it?

No...

# Translators

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

**Rosalia Ignatova** is a translator and English teacher with a diverse portfolio that includes film scripts, poetry, and children's literature. With a keen interest in contemporary prose and poetry, she is striving to bring Bulgarian literary voices to a broader international audience and make contemporary works more accessible and prominent on the global literary stage. Along with English, she also reads in German and Spanish for a wider perspective on different literary traditions.

**Jessica Morris-Ivanova** was born in Louisiana, USA, but has lived for almost half of her life in Italy and Bulgaria. Her bachelor's degree in biology and master's degree in theology have given her a wide knowledge base that paired with her creativity and strong writing skills make her an excellent translator. She serves as the pastor of the Methodist Church in Veliko Tarnovo and also works as a translator. Some of her most noted translation work has been with the University of Palermo, the Catholic Church, and the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Her translations from Bulgarian and Italian are not limited to doctoral theses and journal publications but her creative side shines when working with fictional and literature projects as well. Jessica is married to a native of Ruse, Bulgaria, and their daughter, Stella, is the joy and delight of her life.

**Dilyana Kodjamanova** has graduated from the American College of Sofia. She holds a master's degree in Law from Sofia University and MFA in Creative Writing from American College Dublin. Dilyana works as a content creator and digital marketing specialist. Some of her articles have been published in Curve Magazine, Banitza Magazine, Enhancv Blog, Tuk-Tam platform, and others. She's currently taking part in the Translation Academy organised by Elizabeth Kostova Foundation, where she is working on an English translation excerpt of the novel *Ánne* by Kameliya Panayotova.

**Rumen Pavlov** is a Bulgarian translator, poet and musician. His first poetry collection in Bulgarian, „Отвор“/"An Opening" (2020), received the national Peroto (The Quill) award for best debut book in 2021. Rumen translates from and to English and has translated mainly American poets into Bulgarian—Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Ted Hughes, Robert Lowell, W.H.Auden, and others. Along with translating and writing in Bulgarian, Rumen also writes poetry in English.

**Petya Pavlova** is a London-based freelance Bulgarian-to-English translator born in Sofia. She is a Chartered Linguist and a member of the CIOL and the ITI. Her translations have been published in *Words Without Borders*, *Trafika Europe*, *128 Lit*, the 95th anniversary anthology of PEN Bulgaria, and *Virginia's Sisters*—an anthology of women's writing from the interwar period (Aurora Metro, 2023).

**Ekaterina Petrova** is a literary translator and nonfiction writer. She holds an MFA in Literary Translation from the University of Iowa, where she was awarded the Iowa Arts Fellowship and helped edit *Exchanges: Journal of Literary Translation*. Her work has appeared in *Asymptote*, *Words Without Borders*, *The Southern Review*, *91<sup>st</sup> Meridian*, *European Literature Network*, and elsewhere. Her translation-in-progress of Iana Boukova's novel *Traveling in the Direction of the Shadow* received a 2021 PEN/Heim Translation Fund Grant. She has also received fellowships from ART OMI, the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation, and the TRADUKI literature network.

**Traci Speed** works as a translator and teaches Bulgarian-English translation at Sofia University. She has a PhD in Slavic Linguistics from the University of California, Berkeley, where she focused on South Slavic languages, language contact, and the Balkan Sprachbund. After her first visit to Bulgaria in 1990, she made many trips to the country for both research and volunteer work. Her last research trip was in 2017, when she received a Fulbright grant to carry out sociolinguistic research in the town of Shumen, after which she remained in Bulgaria permanently. She translates both fiction and non-fiction, academic publications, and art museum exhibition catalogues. Her translation of Alek Popov's *Mission: Turan* was published in 2024 by CEEOL Publishers.

**Marina Stefanova** translates fiction and poetry between English and Bulgarian, as well as from Japanese. She holds an MSc in Asia Pacific Studies from Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University and hopes to someday complete her Master's in Translation and Editing from Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski.

## **Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2024**

*Catalogue edited by Svetlozar Zhelev*

*Translation by Traci Speed, Marina Stefanova, Petya Pavlova,*

*Yana Ellis, Rumen Pavlov, Jessica Morris-Ivanova,*

*Dilyana Kodjamanova, Rosalia Ignatova, Christopher Buxton,*

*Miroslav Penkov, Ekaterina Petrova*

*Proofreading and editing by Traci Speed*

*Cover and book design by Damyan Damyanov*

*Printed in Bulgaria*

*Published by the **National Book Centre**,*

*National Palace of Culture – Congress Centre Sofia 2024*

*[www.ndk.bg](http://www.ndk.bg) [www.nbc.bg](http://www.nbc.bg)*

*1 Bulgaria Square, Sofia 1000, Bulgaria*

*[www.ndk.bg](http://www.ndk.bg) [nbc@ndk.bg](mailto:nbc@ndk.bg)*

*phone: +359 2 9166411*