

AT
THE
END
OF
THE
WORLD

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OF THE WORLD

CONTEMPORARY
POETRY FROM BULGARIA

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FOREWORD

This is not an anthology of emblematic poems, but of distinct, recognizable styles. It is not an anthology in the context of the Bulgarian literary model, but seventeen contemporary Bulgarian poets, two of whom have died, who by their original thought and sensitivity in contact with the world broaden its dimensions. So “the priest summons rain while shedding blood,” writes Ilko Dimitrov, for whom the world is not a first discovery, but a “game of shade with light and light with the absence of light” (“The Seller of Threads”).

This is also a thematic book in which accepted classics of Bulgarian poetry stand side by side with the younger generation, opposites, but also likes, which attract. Ilko Dimitrov’s dialectical poetry of the *polis* meets Binyo Ivanov’s anti-logic broken down into sounds, Ekaterina Yosifova’s elliptical and uncertain knitting/unknitting of existence complements Nikolai Kanchev’s development of phraseology in surrealism, Lyubomir Levchev’s Orphic idealism refutes the eternal emigrant Tsvetan Marangozov’s sceptical stance, Ivan Teofilov’s rationalization of nature enriches Ivan Tsanev’s bucolics. They are followed by a list of younger names who all obey this model of dominant individualism, contrasts and extremes, so typical of Bulgarian personality and nature.

Bulgaria is a small country with a “small” language, but with a nature so varied it is almost contradictory, with a history of abrupt twists and turns and a people who find it difficult to create community on account of their strong personal characteristics. Historically speaking, the old Slavonic alphabet, created by the Thessalonian brothers Saints Cyril and Methodius, as well as Christianity, were transmitted to other Slavonic nations, including Kievan Rus, from Bulgaria. Still today, the liturgy in Orthodox churches is held in this language. It is also little known that Bulgaria was the cradle of another civilization that flourished in the fourth century BC alongside the ancient Greeks, that of the Thracians. The Thracians were a kind of alternative to the Greeks. Some tribes, the Getae, unlike their neighbours, believed in a single God, Zalmoxis, in life after death, in the inseparability of the body and soul (very close to the Orthodox view of the Resurrection), and transformed funerals into mysteries, at which they drank undiluted wine. They formed secret male societies, one of whose members was Orpheus, author of the so-called Orphic Hymns, songs of extraordinary finesse and mysticism,

which were handed down orally. Orpheus, famous as the greatest singer of antiquity, was born and buried in the Rhodope mountains of southern Bulgaria, a handsome man who met his death when he was torn to pieces by love-crazed maenads, so that his head and seven-stringed lyre floated down the river Hebrus (Maritsa) to the island of Lesbos in Greece. The Thracians established their sanctuaries around waterfalls and caves and buried their dead in mounds resembling a womb, beehive or egg, with beautifully painted and colourful frescos, using the three architectural forms, the triangle, circle and line (the Thracian tomb of Kazanlak is one of seven World Heritage cultural sites in Bulgaria), the same forms we see in the first Slavonic script, Glagolitic. There is much in common between the Christian God and Orpheus, as there is much in common between the symbols of Glagolitic and Thracian symbols. In the same way Christ was crucified on account of his love, Orpheus died of love. Love towards poetry and beauty, love towards him. Bulgaria is a country of mountains, monasteries, Thracian sanctuaries, waterfalls, caves and a sea called Black on account of its inhospitality.

Bulgarian poetry has inevitably drunk from this mysticism, metaphysics, colourfulness. Nikolai Kanchev wrote perhaps the most beautiful poem about Bulgaria: "As an angel is not a man with wings, so you are not an ordinary place!" ('Bulgaria'), which Tsvetan Marangozov follows with a typically existential discovery revealing the uniqueness of the *topos* in a Heraclitean way about nature/the spirit, which loves to hide: "Isn't the little beauty in this earthly paradise a front for the remaining ugliness?" or "Isn't everything that's alive here actually the dead that doesn't want to die?" (*Mein Land ist Bulgarien*).

So this is also an anthology about the Word after words, about the unusualness in things, their eccentricity even when they feign normality, which is further examined in the work of the poets Kristin Dimitrova, Yordan Eftimov, Nadya Radulova, Petar Tchouhov. Meanwhile Iana Boukova's imaginary prose, Marin Bodakov's concentrated poetry and Silvia Choleva's verse gliding like a river mid-current are all memorable for their timelessness.

The anthology is ordered by the poets' date of birth, beginning with the eldest, Ivan Teofilov, and ending with the youngest, Nikolai Atanasov, though coincidentally these two are the selection's aesthetic framework since both talk about the trembling of things through the trembling of language.

I started this foreword by saying that this is not an anthology of emblematic poems and yet they are what caused me to consider a poet.

Like the spine of a book, which reveals the title and name of the author, allowing the pages to be opened and the real reading to begin.

So I will always remember the emblematic verses of Marin Bodakov about prayer, “knee and pipe for the azure’s circulation” (‘Human Knee’), of Binyo Ivanov about the soul, “when someone leaves, he remains / what departs is his personal cricket” (‘For the Different Stars’), of Ekaterina Yosifova about the Tree of Knowledge or caterpillar tree, “ever since I can remember we talk about the storm / how it will shake, but what about us / me down here, must I trample underfoot?” (‘The Caterpillars’).

This anthology lays no claim to being complete, and therein lies its beauty. It constitutes an experience of existence, which ends—in the words of Binyo Ivanov—with “broken silence.” Silence, which can be both an affirmative and a negative answer, an open end, or that silence Nikolai Kanchev writes about in his poem ‘Post Scriptum’: “At the end of the town, where the houses finish, is the monastery. / At the end of the world, where words finish, is the Word.”

Tsvetanka Elenkova

Nikolai Kanchev

NIETZSCHE STANDING TALL IN THE MOUNTAINS

The wheat on its branches of awns is like fruit
in waxen ripeness and already pierces with the thought
that when overripe it will start to fall...

Everything is drawn in nature with golden letters,
only here and there the wheat is firebrand-dark, as if
in nature spelling mistakes are also underlined.

I carry clouds on my back like sacks full
of graindrops and pour them out into the empty granaries
of souls thirsty for knowledge, I am their porter...

If I collapse like a thunderbolt from the clear sky of my reason,
I will use up my bullets for hunting in the forest
and finally take my dove of the holy spirit.

Binyo Ivanov

NIGHT ANIMALS

The cat behind me.
The cat behind me selects, munches manuscripts.
Or something else.
Or else something: in high heels it rams the pavement.
Along which a pair of demi-headlights
 shoots piles of photons.
And writes on the wall a running
 safety grille.
Affixed in front of the door
 open over ten floors.
And a hat with a little belfry—dark lamp over it.

A hat with a little belfry—dark lamp over it;
I will pull the cord, so the lamp beams, batters
the grille where it's passable;
the grille where it's passable,
 so it lands on top of what
beats, rams, slams, jams the pavement,
the handy, rickety pavement.

The handy, rickety pavement and startles
the criminal, manuscriptophagic animal.
The criminal, manuscriptophagic animal
which promised to munch through
 all the consonant rhymes
in my free verses.
Ticks stuck to my free verses.

Ekaterina Yosifova

BARE FACTS

You have an axe and an island.

The island has a tree.

Just enough for you to hew a dug-out.

You get in the dug-out.

Push off from the shore with the thickest branch
of the aforementioned tree.

The corresponding current takes the boat and carries it
to the shore of the continent. You settle there,
not on the shore, in the town.

The boat has long since rotted.

You don't know the name (you haven't asked) of that island.

Or of that tree.

Iana Boukova

THE POET, ALL IN WHITE

One morning the poet took his white jacket, put on his white hat, tied the leashes of his white dogs and went out into the street. At the cigarette stall, while waiting for his change, "I love you," he suddenly blurted out. This deeply offended the cigarette seller. Offended his male honour, offended his national pride and family and relatives to the ninth degree. He was just about to jump out, in order to put things in their place, when he saw the poet moving away in a flourishing mood, unseasonably attracting insects and leaving behind an irregular trail of blood and subordinate clauses.

Nadya Radulova

WHAT IS LEFT

if from spring we subtract early spring, slush,
crocuses, elevated and light infections of the nasopharynx,
lamb, all skin and bones—now
Christina Rossetti and William Blake will comb wool in the sky—
then the fast, swollen green, the great
desert of April
from the first day to the last,
attacks of blood, the sun,
or just attacks in general; what is left

if from the house we subtract the kids, or thought of kids,
the pillow down, fruit and vegetables
from the big basket in the corner, the corner itself, all corners,
the remarkable silver cobwebs—cutlery of time,
how it borders us with its drivel, chops us
into little pieces—and the tender remains
of a meal, the ablutions,
breeding season; what is left

if we subtract the fish bone stuck in the throat
of the loving, voracious cat, see how it hurdles
the moon in the yard, having lost its catliness,
it is no longer a cat, but a hoop of despair,
a piece of silk set on fire and thrown into the middle of the darkness,
after which even the middle goes out
and all that is left for a moment is the dark, but from the dark
nothing can be subtracted
or left.

Nikolai Atanasov

OYSTER

In the sea of Venus this rugged
man
finds the bottom an inspiring ditch.

But his heavy shield, seemingly harmless,
lies:
inside he is versatile and perfidious.

Exquisite is his nacred spine,
a weapon
jealously guarding a sunken wall.

Behind which he grows small unreasonably,
kicks out
the rays crawling in aid.

He wraps the insidious bodies in pearls,
sentences
violators to enduring beauty.

Until Neptune with his trident does
the same
and the death-filled shell prises open.