

THREE SYRIAC FATHERS

‘Vulkadin talks to God’

*a short story by Yordan Yovkov (1880-1937)**

KRASTU BANEV

‘Words, words, words – they do not reach me.’

Erich Maria Remarque,
All Quiet on the Western Front.

On the battlefields of the First World War – whose centenary we will soon be commemorating – words and language also suffered terrible losses. The scale of the tragedy was vividly portrayed by Erich Maria Remarque in his *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928),¹ from which I have taken the opening quotation. Paul Bäumer, the main hero, comes home on a short leave from the front and is appalled by the way people in his town talk about the war; he is unable to communicate with them. His old books do not speak to him either. Disillusioned, he decides to return to the frontline earlier – only to die there, unnoticed, like millions of other soldiers. Paul’s was a ‘generation of men destroyed by the war’, as Remarque put it in the motto to his book. Arguably, the destruction caused by the war reached its climax with the breaking of all lines of communication: physically – of the cables in the trenches, and metaphorically – of all meaning, shredded by the relentless rattle of the machine guns. As the whole world was coming ‘undone’,² the most honourable faculty left to *homo sapiens* was no longer words but silence.³

* I would like to thank Dr Avril Pyman, Fr Andrew Louth, Francis Garcia and Jonathan Zecher for their help in the preparation of this translation.

¹ Erich Maria Remarque and Joseph Roth, *All Quiet on the Western Front. Job: The Story of a Simple Man*, ed. Helmuth Kiesel, trans. A. W. Wheen and D. Thompson, The German Library 68 (New York: Continuum, 2004), 91-92.

² G.J. Meyer, *A World Undone: The Story of the Great War, 1914 to 1918* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2007).

³ Similarly, the last British veteran of the trenches, Harry Patch who died in 2009, did not speak about the war until his 100th birthday: ‘I did not mention the war even to my first wife,

SEBASTIAN BROCK

In Eastern Europe, on the Bulgarian-Romanian front,¹ the tragic quality of this war-born silence was captured by a Bulgarian author still little known outside of his country, Yordan Yovkov (1880-1937).² Yovkov was born in November 1880 in the small town of Žeravna in the Balkan Mountains. He spent his childhood in Dobrudža,³ where his father owned a large farm. In 1912-1913 the young Yovkov fought as an officer in the Balkan Wars, which ended with the capitulation of Bulgaria. In July 1913, he was recovering from a wound in his leg when the news of his mother's death reached him: she had died of grief in their Dobrudžan village on the day Romanian soldiers had crossed the border. This is how Yovkov described the tragedy in a letter to a friend several years after the events:

and we were together for fifty-seven years. I don't think she had any idea about my service'. Harry Patch and Richard Van Emden, *The Last Fighting Tommy. The Life of Harry Patch, Last Veteran of the Trenches (1898-2009)* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 199.

¹ Readers will note that in the translation of Yovkov's story I retain the spellings 'Rumania' and 'Rumanian', universally current in the decades prior to and after the First World War. Yovkov himself, and also the Romanians, used these spellings, as evidenced for example in Ion Bratianu's 'Declaration of War' delivered to the Austrian Minister on 28 August 1916. See *Source Records of the Great War, Vol. I*, ed. Charles F. Horne, *National Alumni 1923*, consulted online at: <http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/romaniawardeclaration.htm> [accessed 27 August 2011].

² The English reader is best served by the monograph of Edward Mozejko, *Yordan Yovkov* (Columbus, Ohio: Slavica Publishers, 1984). Other important contributions include, Charles A. Moser, *A History of Bulgarian Literature 865-1944*, Slavistic printings and reprintings 112 (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), 193-199; id., 'The Visionary Realism of Jordan Jovkov', *The Slavic and East European Journal* 11, no. 1 (1967): 44-58.

The standard edition of the original is Yordan Yovkov, *Subrani suchinenia v shest toma [Collected Works in Six Volumes]* ed. by Simeon Sultanov (Sofia: Bulgarski pisatel, 1970-1973). This text is now online at Slovo.bg: <http://www.slovo.bg/showauthor.php3?ID=95&LangID=1> [accessed 27 August 2011].

English translations of selected stories have appeared in Yordan Yovkov, *The White Swallow: And Other Short Stories. Translated by M. Cholakova and M. Mincov* (Sofia: Ministry of Information and Arts, 1947); *Short Stories. Translated by M. Mincoff and M. Alexieva* (Sofia: Foreign Languages Press, 1965); *The Inn at Antimovo; and, Legends of Stara Planina. Translated by J. Burnip* (Columbus, Ohio: Slavica Publishers, 1990).

³ Ancient *Scythia Minor*, south of the Danube and bordering on the Black Sea. In Romanian, the standard spelling is Dobrogea with Cadrilater used as the name for its southern part.

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Our village suffered greatly in the war: most of it was burned down and the people taken away as prisoners. My brothers did eventually come back but abandoned the farming and now live scattered in different lands.¹

When Romania entered the First World War on the side of the Allies (August 1916), Bulgaria and the Central Powers proceeded to occupy all of Dobrudža, which was eventually proclaimed Bulgarian territory. Yovkov was conscripted back into the army but this time did not see action.² The Allied victory at the end of the war meant for Bulgaria the loss of all newly acquired territories.³ In December 1918, Yovkov returned to Dobrich, his new Dobrudžan home, where he and his fiancée Despina celebrated their marriage. In the same month, Yovkov witnessed the withdrawal of the Bulgarian troops from Dobrich. He fled the town before the arrival of the Romanian army to avoid being arrested as an ex-officer. He spent eighteen months as a Dobrudžan émigré in Varna where in the summer of 1919 he was joined by his wife. With the help of a friend Yovkov finally obtained a position as a press attaché at the Bulgarian embassy in Bucharest where he worked for eight years (1920-1927). Apparently, he never went to Dobrudža again: he wanted to avoid the possibility of the present destroying his cherished memories from the past.⁴ His painful death from stomach

¹ Yovkov, *Letter to Grigor Vasilev*, Dobrich, 22 October 1918. Yovkov, *Subrani suchinenia*, vol. 6, 228. That crimes against civilians were also committed by the Bulgarian army is seen particularly by the mistreatment of Serbians by Bulgarian forces following the latter's entry into Serbia (see the 'Report from the Holland Section of the "League of Neutral Countries", 1917 by Dr. Niermeijer'). The Bulgarians did not deny that 'reprehensible acts have been committed' in the Serbian territories under their occupation. See relevant documents in *Source Records of the Great War, Vol. IV*, ed. Charles F. Horne, *National Alumni* 1923; online at: http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/serbia_neutralleague.htm [accessed 27 August 2011].

² This time Yovkov served on the Greek-Bulgarian border. He wrote a number of stories recording his war experience in Thrace including one about Easter to be featured under the title 'Holy Night' in a future issue of *Sobornost*.

³ A succinct narrative of these troubled years is found in Misha Glenny, *The Balkans: Nationalism, War, and the Great Powers, 1804-1999* (New York: Viking, 2000), 331-361.

⁴ Dimo Minev, *Yordan Yovkov: Dokumenti i svidetelstva za života i tvorčestvoto mu* (Varna: Bulgarska akademija na naukite i izkustvata, 1947), 51, 132; Simeon Sultanov, *Yovkov i negovijat svjat: literaturni etjudi* (Sofia: Bulgarski pisatel, 1968), 38, 264.



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cancer on 15 October 1937 did not allow him to see Dobrudža's southern part returned to Bulgaria in 1940.¹

Yovkov's personal attitude towards the events in Dobrudža did not mean a negative stance towards Romania and its culture as a whole. In fact, during his time in Bucharest, he served as one of the most highly qualified clerks at the Bulgarian embassy, fluent in Romanian, as well as in Turkish, Russian and French. It was also in the Romanian capital that Yovkov developed a lasting love for Romania as a country, for its music, and for its writers.² In the spring of 1937, several months before his tragic death, Yovkov told his friend Spiridon Kazandžiev, professor of psychology at Sofia, how he wrote many of the *Legends of Stara Planina* in an old coffeehouse in Bucharest, listening to the string orchestra there. It was in that coffeehouse that he sketched one of the scenes of his famous story *Indže* – when the hero mounts his horse – inspired by a powerful melody he heard played by the orchestra.³ Yovkov kept in touch with Romania even after leaving Bucharest in 1927. Thus, during the final decade of his life, which he spent in Sofia, Yovkov continued to follow the literary developments there and wrote regular reviews on the work of his Romanian colleagues. It was also during the Sofia period that he wrote *Vulkadin talks to God*, perhaps his most captivating story about Bulgarians and Romanians in Dobrudža.

¹ With the Treaty of Craiova (7 September 1940). Nor, of course, did Yovkov live to see the arrival in the post-war period of the waves of Romanian political prisoners sent to Dobrudža by the Communist Party as forced labour in the building of the Danube – Black Sea canal (*Canalul Dunăre – Marea Neagră*). A recent estimate places the figure for the total number of prisoners at 1 million for the country as a whole. A significant proportion of these were sent to dig the canal and many of them perished. See James Graff, ‘Continental Shifts’, *Time*, Sunday, Dec. 04, 2005. Available online at: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,901051212-1137619,00.html> [accessed 27 August 2011].

² Yovkov had a special admiration for the works of Ion Creangă, Ion Luca Caragiale and Mihail Sadoveanu. See the memoirs of Iordan Stratiev, in Minko Nikolov, K. Genov, and Simeon Sultanov, eds., *Anton Strashimirov, Elin Pelin, Yordan Yovkov: V spomenite na suvremennitsite si* (Sofia: Bulgarski pisatel, 1962), 387.

³ Conversation with S. Kazandžiev of 4 April 1937, in Nikolov, Genov, and Sultanov, *V spomenite*, 527.

Vulkadin talks to God is one of Yovkov's mature works.¹ In August 1930, Yovkov disclosed to professor Kazandžiev that he was planning a novel with which 'to grip the heart of every Bulgarian'.² *Vulkadin* appeared in 1932 and then, a second time with small alterations, in 1935 – just two years before the author's untimely departure for his eternal abode. In a short newspaper article published on New Year's Eve, 1934, Yovkov wished all future Bulgarian writers success by advising them to remain 'soaked in the spirit of the nation'.³ True to his creed, Yovkov had written not a novel but a short story inspired by a national tragedy: Dobrudža, the disputed land between Bulgaria and Romania. The idea was suggested to him by Grigor Vasilev who tells of his meeting with the writer in his memoirs:

Yovkov lived the last years of his life in Sofia. We met seldom but each time we met we had a long conversation. Once I asked him to take up and develop a plot. I told him of a true story; after a long pause, Yovkov suddenly declared: 'I shall try my pen on a short story which perhaps might grow later into a novel similar to *Quo Vadis* but, of course, would be a completely original piece.' *Vulkadin* is not a Bulgarian farmer from Dobrudža. Yovkov told me there and then that he was going to transplant him onto the

¹ 'Vulkadin talks to God' appeared first on 7 December 1932 in the paper *Zora*, XIII, No 3732, and then with small alterations in the collection of short stories *A Woman's Heart* in 1935 (Moser, *A History of Bulgarian Literature 865-1944*, 195) The translation is made from: Yordan Yovkov, *Subrani suchinenia*, vol. 3, 93-101.

² Conversation with S. Kazandžiev of 28 August 1930, in Nikolov, Genov, and Sultanov, *V spomenite*, 481-482.

³ New Year's speech of 1934, in Sultanov, *Svjat*, 263. This is how one of Yovkov's contemporaries, Georgi Vulchev, described, with the usual pathos of the time, the author's intent: 'Yovkov wrote this short story to give voice to his sorrow over the enslavement of Dobrudža by the Rumanians. The story is fictional from beginning to end and does not represent a concrete occurrence. Yet it achieves its main goal of expressing the sorrow of the whole of Dobrudža. There are quite a few villages along the border whose fields were left in Rumania, as for example Sarudža, Deli Yusufkuyusu, and perhaps even Chifutkuyusu [*i.e.* Yovkov's own village – KB] because this village was also on the border. The names of the heroes are also fictional. The name Vulkadin is not known in our parts. We have Vulcho, Vulyo, Vulchan, Velcho, but I have never heard of a Vulkadin before. Also unknown are the names Milena and Kudra.' Minev, *Dokumenti*, 250.

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fertile Dobrudžan soil. It was with a warm feeling of joy that I offered Vulkadin to him, for Dobrudža.¹

The moving of borders which lies in the background of Vulkadin’s story can be dated to November 1919 when Romania took control of the whole of Dobrudža. Thus, a period of nearly two crucial decades separates the time of publication from the events described in Vulkadin’s story. The distance has allowed the author to soak his hero ‘in the spirit of the nation’ in a unique way. The patriotic nationalism, which is a common feature of some of his earlier works, is not discernible in this masterpiece.²

From a patriarchal figure, a landowner with a large extended family, Vulkadin has become a strange being: he lives alone, and he does not talk. His name, however, says a great deal.³ ‘Vulk’ is the Bulgarian for ‘wolf’, and Vulkadin, like the worst wolves, lives on his own. But as opposed to normal wolves that cause harm, stealing sheep and devastating estates, Yovkov’s hero is a new creature. He spends all his time grazing his cow on the hill overlooking his village cut in

¹ Minev, *Dokumenti*, 251.

² Yordan Yovkov is remembered by his fellow Bulgarians as the most ‘Bulgarian’ of all writers. His humanist vision, with a special place for Christ as the greatest and the most effective *source of goodness* appeals to more and more people in post-communist Bulgaria. In 1996, for example, seven years after the fall of communism, the Bulgarian film director Ivan Andonov produced a film based on a thematic selection of Yovkov’s stories. Revealingly, the title chosen for this film was *Vulkadin talks to God*. (The film is searchable online on Youtube under: Vulkadin is talking with God).

The same desire for a Christian reworking of the memory of the Balkan tragedies during the first quarter of the 20th century is visible in Romanian and Macedonian cinema as well. In 1994, Lucian Pintilie directed a film on the suffering of Dobrudžan peasants under the oppressive regime of their post-WWI Romanian masters: *An Unforgettable Summer* (French: *Un été inoubliable*, Romanian: *O vară de neuitat*). ‘Each person, in this ethnic madness, must clean his own doorstep.’ Lucian Pintilie succinctly explained the nature of his project in an interview for *The New York Times* (see A. Insdorf, ‘Romanian Director Tells A Tale of Ethnic Madness’, *The New York Times*, November 06, 1994). The relevant Macedonian film is *Before the Rain* (Macedonian: *Пред дождот*, *Pred doždot*) directed by Milcho Manchevski (1994). I thank my Cambridge friends Razvan Porumb and Borce Kitanov for sharing these references with me.

³ Yovkov used to spend a long time with newspapers and archives looking for good names and once said that ‘a single name pushes you and gives you inspiration for a whole story’. Nikolov, Genov, and Sultanov, *Uspomenite*, 519.

two by the new border. The war has broken horizontal lines of communication – but has opened up a vertical one. Vulkadin, Yovkov's 'wolfman', is standing alone on the hill above the village, howling in pain, and, like another great Job, remonstrating desperately with God.

Vulkadin talks to God

Whenever he wanted to remember how disaster came to his house the first time, before becoming a regular visitor, Vulkadin would call to mind that particular evening of the August harvest, when, after they had blown the chaff, the big pile of corn shone like gold on the stack-yard, and through the swarming dust to the East there arose the moon, all red. The weather was still very sultry even after sunset. He was working alone, with his daughters-in-law and with the children, because his sons were still away at the war. And before the harvesters had carried the corn into the barns, unloaded the sheaves off the carts and gathered in their tools and belongings, the moon leapt up, changed to white, and when they sat down for their evening meal, it was all as bright as broad daylight. Vulkadin then said:

‘Wait a little more, until we finish the yard. When your husbands return, I will divide it all among you. I will give you everything. There is nothing I want to keep for myself. It is enough for me, while I am still alive, to be able to walk over to see you from time to time.’

Opposite him sat Milena, the youngest of his daughters-in-law. A pretty woman, young, strong, her eyes, as always, laughing, her round face lit up in the moonlight. He looked at her. A smile came to his face and he said:

‘And, for Milena, I have something special to give. What it is, I will not say now but when the time comes I will have it ready for her.’

They had worked well. He felt more relaxed and asked Milena to sing for him ‘Milen to Milena was saying’. He loved this song because of the names: his daughter-in-law was Milena and his son, her husband, was Milen – just as in the song. He would listen to it and his heart would rejoice looking at her, and then grieve thinking of Milen

who, together with his two brothers, was still at the war and no one knew if he or they would come back alive.

What happened afterwards? His sons returned home, alive and in good health, but he did not recognise them: there was confusion in their souls, they could not give you a straight look, and were short-tempered and savage as hunted wolves. The times became difficult: all things began to roll back like a runaway cart on a steep slope. First the armies who had left for Kjustendža and Tulcha *started returning in disarray* – straggling along day and night, in rain, in mud and in the cold, hungry and exhausted.¹ Soldiers stopping in the villages and knocking from door to door would ask for a piece of bread like beggars. In the spring, when the snow melted, one could tell how quickly they had passed and what a furrow of sorrow they had left behind them from the roads they had walked – all white with the bones of their dead pack beasts. Once again, the Rumanians came back and put the border where it had been before, just in front of the houses. The village was on this side and half of its fields on the other.

He kept his word and divided everything between his sons. But what was the use of it? They were not fated to see anything good, neither his sons nor he. The middle son, Atanas, fell ill straight after he came back. Nothing serious, they said, just a cold, but he lay down and never got up again. The eldest son, Nicolas, a strong lad, handsome – who had been the apple of his father’s eye when returning on leave from the army as a sergeant major decorated with medals all over his chest – he decided to go into politics and was elected mayor. He was a strict man, upholding justice and the law, but who would listen, who would care for the ways of justice? And so it was that one evening, as he was sitting with his friends in the tavern, someone fired at him through the window and killed him. He was gone as well. Behind him he left yet another widow, yet another black headscarf catching the eye on frequent visits from village to cemetery.

¹ Kjustendža is the Bulgarian for Constanța, a major port on the Black Sea (ancient Tomis, Greek Constantia). Tulcha is the Bulgarian for Tulcea, a large city at the Danube delta on the southern bank of the river (Greek Aegyssus). The Bulgarians took Kjustendža on 25 October 1916 and Tulcha on 4 January 1917. Yovkov’s reference is probably to the return of these soldiers – firstly victorious but now disillusioned – at the end of the war.

The youngest son Milen was the only one left. His lot were the fields over the border, in Rumania, and that is where he lived – in a foreign village and a foreign kingdom. He was only a step away but he could not call in to see his father, and the old man could not visit his son when he wished to do so. Vulkadin developed a new habit: he would get up in the morning, drive the cow out to graze – just so that he had something to keep him busy – and then climb to the top of the hill over the village. There was a big old elm tree there and, while the cow grazed around, he would sit under the elm tree leaning against its trunk, gazing across the border. His two eldest sons, now at rest, had left grown-up sons of their own who were taking care of the work: he was not thinking about them. He was worried instead about Milen. Every now and again, as he was looking over the border, Milen and Milena would come out to work on the fields. He would recognise their faces, the way they walked, if they were close by – or their plough animals, if they were further away – and would look at them for hours. Between him and them was the border, and from time to time patrols of foreign soldiers would pass by with blue overcoats and peaked hats.

One day, the village was all on edge: there was bad news from across the border. The gendarmes had come to the village where Milen lived: they beat people up, tortured them and then bound them and hauled them off into the interior. With great difficulty Vulkadin managed to cross the border and to find Milen. When they got him out of the prison for his father to see him, it set the old man's heart bleeding: Was this Milen? Was this his son with this black face, hollow eyes, blood clots on his forehead and cheeks? Vulkadin looked at Milen, lowered his gaze to the ground, and he uttered not a word of protest.

‘Tell me, Milen, tell me, my son, if you did not do anything, if you are not at fault, it's another kingdom here but I will go, I will pay, I will give the bread out of my mouth to get you out.’

‘No, Dad,’ he said. ‘I haven't done anything. They beat the life out of me, they took my health. If only I could cross back and die there.’

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When thinking of all this – as he did every day – Vulkadin would stand as before under the elm tree with his eyes fixed over the border. Milen was not there anymore. But would he not see in the fields their white and black horses, would he not see alongside them Milena and her children? The corn was in the ear but there were no people in the fields. Only the green ears of corn and among them many, many poppies, red as blood.¹

Vulkadin got up and tied the cow to lead her to the village. He walked without lifting up his eyes, without looking left or right. When he came to the house, he overheard his eldest daughter-in-law, Kudra, talking to someone in the room. He kept away from meeting people but this time he felt as if someone was pushing him, and he entered. In front of him he saw Milena. The women got up. Milena kissed his hand and burst into tears. Tears flooded from Kudra’s eyes too. Milena cried for a long time. She would calm down for a moment, try to say something and then her chest would start shaking again and she would lift her apron to wipe her tears. Without saying anything, Vulkadin went out.

‘Where did Father go?’ She asked. ‘I came for him, didn’t I? There’s so much I want to talk to him about.’

The women went out and looked for him. Vulkadin was not there.

‘Don’t be upset, Milena dear, don’t mind him.’ Kudra began to comfort her. ‘Our father-in-law has become somewhat strange... silent. Whatever we say to him, however much we try to get him talking, he doesn’t open his mouth, doesn’t say anything, just silence. And this is not since yesterday, it’s months now that he’s been like that.’

They went back to the house, stayed for a little while chatting about their happy moments, and about their misfortunes. Several times their father-in-law was mentioned and Kudra explained how, after the death of their husbands, and especially after the death of Milen, he had

¹ Striking here is the image of poppies, similar, though surely not intentionally so, to the famous poem ‘In Flanders Fields’ by John McCrae: ‘In Flanders fields the poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row...’.

changed beyond all recognition. He would not go down to the village. He would not meet anyone. And he would not talk. He would not talk either to his own kind or to others. The whole village knew this: that Vulkadin would not talk, that Vulkadin did not want to talk. And this is how he became: silent. Silent and thinking. What he was thinking – the Lord only knew.

When she got up ready to go, Milena said:

‘If I could, I’d wait for him to come back. But I can’t because the people that brought me here are in a hurry to leave. Tell him, Kudra my dear, you tell him what I said to you: I hold Milen dear, the Lord sees it, but what am I to do? It’s not for happiness that I want a second marriage. This man came. They say he is a good soul and he has only one child. I can’t manage alone. We need a man in the house to keep what we have for the children. It is for them that I do it. And also for myself, a widow, so that people shouldn’t gossip about me. I hold Milen dear, but what am I to do? I ask Father to forgive me and to bless me. Do say this to him.’

Kudra walked with her sister-in-law not only to the gate, but all the way to the cart and stayed there until she got onto it and left to cross the border.

Vulkadin returned home at nightfall. Kudra gave him the full story of why Milena had come and what she had asked. He listened but said nothing. He ate his supper, shut himself in his room and, as always, went to bed early. But before an hour or two had passed, he woke up and opened his eyes as if he had not slept at all. And in his mind – the same ongoing thought: never breaking and never stopping – same as yesterday and the day before – like the thread running through a spinning-wheel:

‘Who are those who judge the peoples and rule over the world? Who gives them this power? Do they have a God? Are they not also the children of mothers and are they not going to die as all people do? How can one draw a border just like that, wherever, to leave the cemetery in one country, and in the other – the relatives of those buried there? You try to visit your brother, to see your son, and you are met by some foreign soldier who has come from nobody knows where, he turns a gun on you, a knife and says: “Stand back!” There

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you are in your own home and they come to drive you out. How is this possible, O God, how?

‘Who sets brother against brother and son against father? Why is the good all gone and evil spreading? A bear runs after you and you meet a wolf, you run away from a wasp and a snake bites you. There is no mercy, no kind words, no respect. Why, O God, why?’

‘When people buy or sell things, their eyes are fixed on the scales. But why are they so careless when they judge a human being, when life is within a hair’s breadth of death? Was there no one who could see that Milen hadn’t done anything, that he is in the right, pure and innocent? Why do they kill those who’ve done nothing wrong and oppress the poor? Why, O God, why?’

‘The earth bears fruit as much as it has done before. Why are there hungry people, why are there the poor, the down and out? And over there, the other side of the border, what’s going on? They take other people’s homes for their own. A stranger sits by the hearth and drives the master of the house outside, banishes him to the stable like an animal. The old men bend their heads; the young clench their teeth and keep silent. Why in this time of havoc do you hide yourself, O God? Why?’

And so the hours pass by. The day is breaking, the window is all red – it is sunrise. Vulkadin gets up, drives the cow in front of him and goes out of the village. At the top of the hill he sits under the elm tree, his eyes fixed first on one side of the border, then the other; and his thoughts, strung like beads, keep running ceaselessly, endlessly on.

Some ten days later, Milena came a second time. Kudra’s grave and thoughtful expression when she met her made her realize that she was not going to hear good news.

‘Did you tell Father? What did he say?’

‘Oh, Milena dear. If only he’d say a word, good or bad. But the man’s sealed his lips, he’s gone all silent. I told him, I told him everything. Here it is – this is what he gave me...’

She untied the knot on the bundle, golden coins shone there: three large *mahmudiyes* and about twenty smaller *rubiyes*.¹

¹ Ottoman gold coins.

‘Give those’, he told me, ‘to Milena. She has my blessing. She should do what the Lord has taught her.’

‘Didn’t he say anything else?’

‘That’s all he said. And these are all the words I have heard from him for about a year now.’

Milena did not take the money. She left the bundle on the ground.

‘It wasn’t money that I asked from him,’ she said. ‘I want to hear from him a good word, a word of advice. Why’s he giving me this necklace of coins to wear?’¹

‘How do I know, Milena my dear. Thinking about it now, I remember that he did promise to give you something. Do you remember when we were at the harvest, when the men were still away at war? He promised on that day that he’d have something to give you. Maybe this is it.’

At that moment, Milena remembered the evening and her memory was as vivid as if she were seeing it all happening again: the moon was up, her father-in-law asked her to sing ‘Milen to Milena was saying’. Tears welled up in her eyes. ‘He promised to give me something,’ she thought. ‘This is what it must have been.’

‘But it’s not money I want!’ She cried out with pain. ‘I want to hear him say a good word, to console me. I’ll wait for him. Today, and tomorrow, I’ll stay here and I will see him.’

She had clearly decided to wait for him, but after a while talking with Kudra her heart grew heavy.

‘I can’t bear it any longer. I’ll have to find him. Where does he go?’

‘Where can he go? You know the elm tree there above the village? That’s where he is, always under that elm tree.’

Milena adjusted her headscarf and went out. Crossing the village she did not see anyone, nobody met her. She set off up the hill: ‘What a kind heart, what a wise man my father-in-law used to be back then.’

¹ Necklace or chain strung with coins as traditionally worn by a bride.

‘VULKADIN TALKS TO GOD’

she thought. ‘How he used to make jokes out of everything, and how much we used to laugh together. And now, our sorrow, his and mine, is large as the sea. But what can we do? Whatever happens, happens: the dead do not come back from the grave. Why is he running away from me, why wouldn’t he utter a word?’

She reached the top of the hill and looked around: there, under the elm tree, was her father-in-law. And what was he doing? He had his head down on his knees, thinking. Every now and then he would raise his eyes upwards. Was he looking at the branches of the tree, or into heaven? Milena came near him but he did not notice her. But then he saw her, turned to the left, turned to the right as if searching for a place to hide, and then got up.

‘Father, dad!’ shouted Milena.

Vulkadin walked away quickly. She ran after him. She caught up with him. He could hear her steps behind him but did not turn back.

‘Father, wait! Why are you running away from me? Dad, Dad...’

He continued walking, as if deaf. Overcome by her grief, Milena burst into tears. Then he turned: a tall man, with a beard black at the ends and white in the middle, with a heavy gaze, drawn inward, lost in thought. And again he said nothing.

‘Dear man, say something to me!’ said Milena weeping. ‘Why are you running away from me?’

Vulkadin just looked at her.

‘Say a word, at least one... Father, talk!’

She moved towards him. Vulkadin raised his hand and stopped her.

‘Go. Leave me. What do you want me to speak about? I have nothing to speak about. I’m speaking with God.’

He turned away and continued walking. Milena remained as she was, astounded and confused. All of a sudden, as if understanding what he wanted to say to her, she stopped and then followed him no more. She looked after him till he disappeared into the distance and then turned back, her face bathed in tears.