
ALEXANDER KOROTKO
BERA AND CUCUMBER

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by Alexander Korotko

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GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

CONTENTS

MASYA

Solomon Volkovich Nukhlis was slightly if solidly built, fairly well-fed, and penguin-shaped. He always appeared before a potential client suddenly and decisively and, without giving him time to collect himself, took the offensive and struck a swinging blow to the weak spots of the possessor of his imminent advance. Solomon Volkovich juggled the words "old age" and "solitude" like a professional juggler tosses firesticks in the circus ring. It was precisely at these historic moments he would take the bull by the horns and drive him mad.

His arsenal was full to the brim with a variety of verbal psychological weapons which, so our hero firmly believed, left his victim no chance of refusal. The start of the attack depended not so much on the personality of the repentant as on the dark areas in his biography.

The following recitative was offered to persons whose income was dubious: "Don't think you're the cleverest and that no one will guess where you got it from, what and when." And then in a softer and trusting voice: "Oh, stop it and calm down. I'm not after it." And his ward, who lived in perpetual terror, didn't hear the second part of the monologue and the first acquaintance already seemed far from the first, and he felt himself to be not on the threshold of his own house but in the dock.

After his preliminary bombardment, our hero would retreat exactly three paces from his opponent, get a none-too-fresh handkerchief, wipe the sweat from his brow and, without allowing his partner to collect himself would leap abruptly, boxer-style at his opponent, insofar as his belly allowed, and would exhale sacral sounds which, like oxygen, filled his balloon-like words with a particular symbolic sense.

Thus was born a part of speech in the form of a chain of, at first sight, meaningless sentences. Here is one of them: "How can I know that you don't know. Don't compel me to persuade; it won't help."

Yes, he loved Alexander Blok and Andrei Belyi and considered himself to be their successor, but this was a secret hermetically sealed and hidden deep in his soul, like the heart of Koshchei the Deathless.

When the session of simultaneous playing with the nerves and emotions of his opponent was drawing to a close, he was waiting, not for the ovations but for the transformation of his client into a customer. However, there were occasions when his client, now recovered from his delusions and in a semi-conscious state, would try to the best of his ability to slam the door in his face, but to no avail – a size thirty-seven foot stood like a latch in the doorway. Sometimes the client, instead of shaking hands on a deal, missed the opportunity – *oy vey*[1] – and the Broker (thus Solomon Volkovich styled himself), would get it you know where, and why, but we won't talk about that.

The image of our hero would not be complete if we didn't mention the main feature of his character – his good-

[1] Yiddish: phrase that expresses grief, pain, or frustration.

ness. In fact, he was only sharp and impulsive with insects; with people he was accommodating and tactful, soft and indecently ingratiating. Admittedly, a client's reluctance to be happy would cause bursts of rage in him and he would become hysterical, but this would last only a few moments and was more like flashes of lightning during a thunderstorm.

As a rule, clients did not notice these cataclysms on the Broker's face; they were more concerned with their own worries. Our hero would quickly suppress his anger, his blood would return to its usual channel and the conversation would continue smoothly along shores named in honour of buyer and seller.

Solomon Volkovich always dreamed of being a philosopher-philanthropist, and even a patron of the arts. He had a hankering for the carefree life of beauty, but the wind of change blew him off course and he would sit on a sandbank in the inshore waters of unsettledness until the night breeze of success remembered him and bore him away to other shores, where there would be no grey weekdays or queues, where the handout in the form of a pension would find itself a new victim. His best years went by in expectation of this. Were they the best? It depends what one compares them with; but there was nothing to compare them with.

Thus he lived – not so much through memories as through the hope that one fine day everything would change. He even imagined how burdensome luxury would become and the idle chatter of models who sought intimacy with him. At such moments Solomon Volkovich experienced not so much an excess of strength as a sleepiness and depression; he couldn't stop yawning; his imagination painted cheerless pictures of his future life, satiated and mo-

notonous; he wanted to abandon everything and get the hell out of it. Then he bethought himself and realised that he was at home anyway and his life, ruined by desires, was on duty, like a sentry, preserving his present from the nomadic raids of illusions.

Usually such moods took hold of him deep into autumn, when the mahogany buds of sunset were swelling. He dismissed these delusions, as he would have dismissed importunate flies and swiftly, stepping out like a soldier at a military parade, marched past the rostrum of his solitude and went to work, as if to war.

"After all, the most important thing in our business," Masya never tired of saying (this was the affectionate name given him by his late wife Mirra) "is mood and the certainty of achieving your planned goal." Truth to tell, he realized no one was waiting for him anywhere. No, well so what? He didn't land on their head like snow and after all, snow has the capacity to melt. Solomon Volkovich was more like a tick – if he attached himself to you, it was for a long time.

Masya, forgive me for my indelicacy, but he considered himself to be to some extent a Messiah; true, not such a big and real one, who would come and save the Jewish people after its victory over Gog and Magog, but a modest little one, like David, conqueror of Goliath; but all the same a Messiah. After all, when a deal went through, he rescued, he dragged from the abyss of solitude aged, weary people.

Yes, Masya was afraid of everything on earth, but this was only the outward manifestation of his character; in his heart he was a wild beast, a gambler. As far as courage went – *azohen vey*.[2] Sometimes nuances let him down – but

[2] Literally translates as "when [I want to say] 'oh' and 'vey'." "Vey"

whom don't they let down? He only had to take a deposit and come to an agreement with a customer about setting up a new family nest when one of the doves (his name for the future loving couple) would, for no particular reason and, so help me if I tell a lie, without informing him in advance, depart this life. But Masya was no mystic and did not expect to return and, terrible to relate, did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. You will say: but he still got the deposit. Yes, he did. But Masya was not a man to be satisfied with little.

But how so? The reader may be outraged, and with justification; after all, our hero, like his clients, was on his own. Why did he not think of himself in the first instance, being the owner – don't misunderstand me – of the oldest profession. The fact is, he was, by nature, fiery and passionate, frequently got carried away, and in a way he at times dealt with others, could allow himself, who was far from being a stranger, to be palmed off, one never knew when, with goods long past their sell-by date – as they say on the Moldavanka, to create a right *tsuris*[3] for himself.

When he wasn't earning his daily bread, or to be more accurate, dosh, he could sit for a long time on the deserted seashore and gaze into the distance. The events which were happening behind the scenes of the horizon afforded him no peace at all, "Theatre is theatre," Masya muttered continually, "and I know its *foyle shtik*[4]." Passers-by thought he was thinking "for eternity." But he didn't in-

means "grief," and "oh" expresses a sorrowful mood with moans and sighs.

[3] Yiddish: a difficulty, trouble.

[4] Yiddish: monkey business, underhandedness.

tend to lift a finger in its direction. With his range he wasn't up to mountain heights.

When you looked at Solomon Volkovich you began to understand that everyone, bar solitude, repudiated him. He had not lived out his time; he had avoided it.

But something unusual had happened in every year of his life. That's what happened this time too. A feeling of his own worth overfilled him and the joy of existence poured over the edge, and it was, of course, summer, when Masya rented out his dacha with board and lodging at Bolshoi Fontan 16th station. Well, what do you mean, he hadn't done anything for a long time, for anyone else; of course, it was for himself. It was a time when Solomon Volkovich pushed the boat out, and not just one boat. As they say, *mazel tov*.[5]

Can a confirmed bachelor feed himself three times a day? It turns out he can, but only in summer and only at Bolshoi Fontan 16th station. The morning would begin with a celebration; breakfast was merely the cause of everything. Our hero would go out onto the terrace, where there was an old, high quality oak table, wearing wide flannel trousers, a white linen shirt, over which were decorative *nepman* braces; on his feet were white canvas shoes. A real king, somewhat powdered with mothballs, but a king all the same, or, as they say in Odesa, *yurets*.

At table he was thoughtful and magnanimous, as was appropriate for the heir to the throne. The picture was slightly spoiled by his retinue, that is to say the flat dwellers who were indelicate enough to sit alongside him, but in spite of this, he was affable and indulgent and gave no indication that this circumstance had hurt his pride and gave him

[5] Good fortune.

no opportunity to spread his wings finally and soar to the mountain heights, where his chaste soul, an equal among equals, touched the wellsprings of his past life and did not wish to return to the cage, to the physical envelope named Solomon Volkovich.

These were indeed tragic moments, when he hovered between life and death. He had one soul, a real smasher, but what about his body? A pitiful sweet wrapper, nothing more. All the same, these were incomparable moments of bliss; in our hero spiritual insight would open out, he would be possessed by prophetic visions, his hearing would react to the smallest sounds and whispers. He would hear the voices of his forefathers. The only thing he could not distinguish was where the voice of Abraham was, and where Isaac and Jacob were. He wanted to betray his country and settle in the Promised Land and, standing at the Wailing Wall, to atone for his sins. This access of incandescent passion reached its apogee and Masya would rise like an eagle, higher and higher and, when he reached the sun, would burn his wings and fall like a stone to earth, where the cares and anxieties of a new day awaited him.

As you have already guessed, the events about which I want to tell you, took place in summer. It was holy August in Odesa, majestic and impressive. When a melancholic breath of wind merely disturbed the mental equilibrium of its citizens, Odesites did not move, expecting changes, and prayed for mercy. The houses with their wide-open windows reminded one of hatchlings in the nest with open beaks, eager for coolness, as if it were manna from heaven and it came closer to dawn in the form of a draught which roamed from the kitchen to the bedroom, from the bedroom onto the balcony, and the heat of the day, the

fire-breathing dragon Zmei Gorynych, would back off and return to its native penates, to the steppe, and there wait until midday when it would regain its power over the city.

At this lifeless time of year Nature was heavily pregnant and had no time to think about such trifles as coolness, and Odesites guessed this and did not grumble and, indeed, why grumble when everything breathed delight.

But the sea, what about the sea? It lay breathless, lower than the level of passion and contemplated the sky with colourless fish eyes, in the mirror of its solitude. It was a different matter in winter. The sea and the steppe, torn apart by jealousy in the horizontal plane of love, tormented the town from all sides with dank winds which penetrated the soul and the unsubjugated town was reminiscent of a fortress and endured siege after siege. Well, what can one say apart from, in a word, Odesa is a hero-city.

One has only to start talking about Odesa before one loses the thread; you want to phone someone, agree to meet them, whizz off at breakneck speed to a café, hang around the town aimlessly and, totally exhausted and scarcely able to move one's legs, return home, settle in front of the television and think, not about a better life, but about how splendid it is to do nothing.

But it is time to return to Solomon Volkovich.

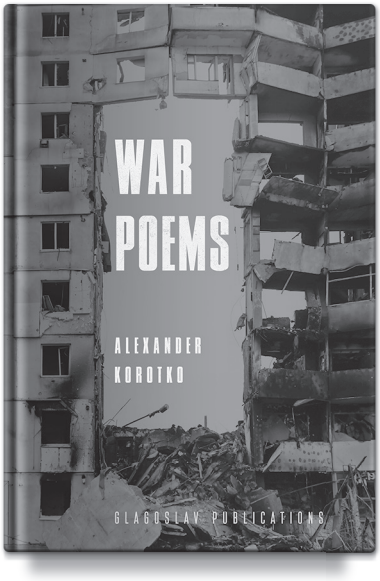
Like every solitary person, our hero had his quirks which, with the years, became less attractive and more prominent. Undoubtedly, these are expenses, so to say, the consequences of his beloved brokerage business, And what's so surprising about that? Every profession, with time, puts its stamp not only on a person's gait, on his

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Michael Pursglove (born 22 September 1944) is a retired Senior Lecturer in Modern Languages at Exeter University. He was educated at Bradford Grammar School, King's College Cambridge and New College, Oxford. He also taught at the universities of Ulster, Reading and Bath. He has published, as translator or co-translator, eleven book-length translations, including five novels and a volume of short stories by Turgenev and, most recently, the Ukrainian novels *Children of Grad*, O *Venice*, and Alexander Korotko's *Moon Boy*. He has also written widely on literature and translation issues, most recently in *East-West Review*. His published translations of poetry include works by Pushkin, Lermontov, Turgenev, Akhmatova and Mandelshtam.

WAR POEMS

by Alexander Korotko



Soon after Russia invaded Ukraine on 24th February 2022, author and poet Alexander Korotko began to set down as poetry the turbulent responses at the emotional, philosophical and simply human levels evoked by the resulting war. Thus, we read in the 88 poems in this volume – completed in just less than 100 days – of the seemingly endless wail of sirens; of sheltering in cellars and tunnels; of the celebrated Ukrainian steppe, churned by tanks; the dead – "our killed, have become our Saviour Angels"; and whole poems devoted to Irpin and Mariupol as the atrocities there and elsewhere became known. Korotko is not without compassion for the Russian soldier – "Russian soldier, what did you forget in my land? We had grief enough without you." – and the soldier's mother when she receives his dead body as "cargo 200". Neither does he conceal his frustration with Ukraine's allies – "we pay the West for help with blood, but the West makes no haste to deliver."

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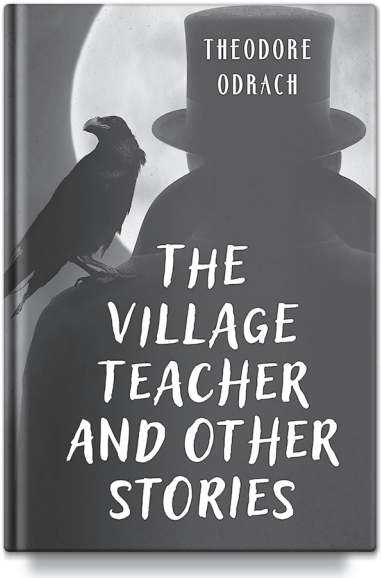
THE VILLAGE TEACHER AND OTHER STORIES

by Theodore Odrach



The twenty-two stories in this collection, set mostly in Eastern Europe during World War Two, depict a world fraught with conflict and chaos. Theodore Odrach is witness to the horrors that surround him, and as both an investigative journalist and a skilful storyteller, using humor and irony, he guides us through his remarkable narratives. His writing style is clean and spare, yet at the same time compelling and complex. There is no short supply of triumph and catastrophe, courage and cowardice, good and evil, as they impact the lives of ordinary people.

In "Benny's Story", a group of prisoners fight to survive despite horrific circumstances; in "Lickspittles", the absurdity of an émigré writer's life is highlighted; in "Blood", a young man travels to a distant city in search of his lost love; in "Whistle Stop", two German soldiers fight boredom in an out-of-the-way outpost, only to see their world crumble and fall.

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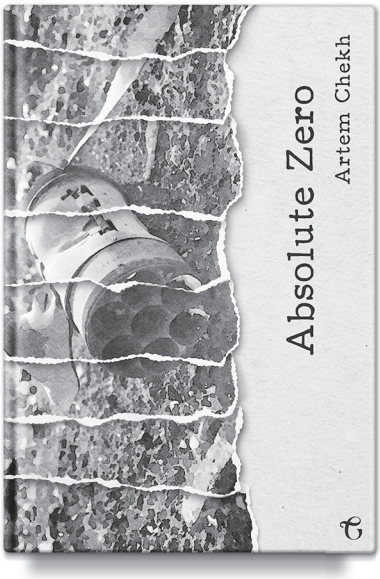
ABSOLUTE ZERO

by Artem Chekh



The book is a first person account of a soldier's journey, and is based on Artem Chekh's diary that he wrote while and after his service in the war in Donbas. One of the most important messages the book conveys is that war means pain. Chekh is not showing the reader any heroic combat, focusing instead on the quiet, mundane, and harsh soldier's life. Chekh masterfully selects the most poignant details of this kind of life.

Artem Chekh (1985) is a contemporary Ukrainian writer, author of more than ten books of fiction and essays. *Absolute Zero* (2017), an account of Chekh's service in the army in the war in Donbas, is one of his latest books, for which he became a recipient of several prestigious awards in Ukraine, such as the Joseph Conrad Prize (2019), the Gogol Prize (2018), the Voyin Svitla (2018), and the Litaktsent Prize (2017). This is his first book-length translation into English.

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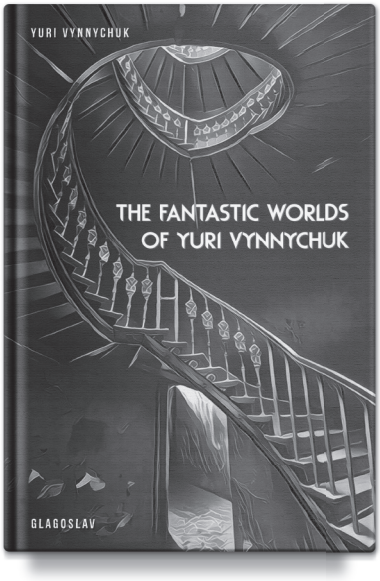
THE FANTASTIC WORLDS OF YURI VYNNYCHUK

by Yuri Vynnychuk



Yuri Vynnychuk is a master storyteller and satirist, who emerged from the Western Ukrainian underground in Soviet times to become one of Ukraine's most prolific and most prominent writers of today. He is a chameleon who can adapt his narrative voice in a variety of ways and whose style at times is reminiscent of Borges. A master of the short story, he exhibits a great range from exquisite lyrical-philosophical works such as his masterpiece "An Embroidered World," written in the mode of magical realism; to intense psychological studies; to contemplative science fiction and horror tales; and to wicked black humor and satire such as his "Max and Me." Excerpts are also presented in this volume of his longer prose works, including his highly acclaimed novel of wartime Lviv *Tango of Death*, which received the 2012 BBC Ukrainian Book of the Year Award. The translations offered here allow the English-language reader to become acquainted with the many fantastic worlds and lyrical imagination of an extraordinarily versatile writer.

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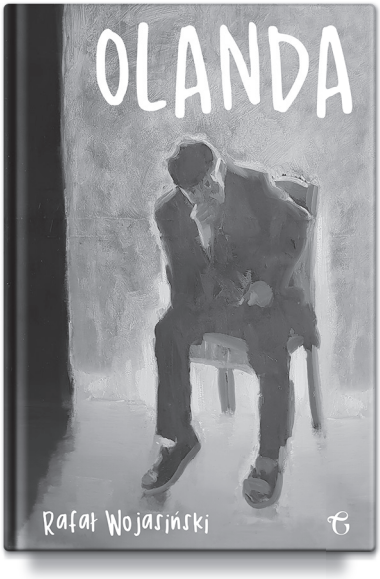
OLANDA

by Rafał Wojasiński



I've been happy since the morning. Delighted, even. Everything seems so splendidly transient to me. That dust, from which thou art and unto which thou shalt return — it tempts me. And that's why I wander about these roads, these woods, among the nearby houses, from which waft the aromas of fried pork chops, chicken soup, fish, diapers, steamed potatoes for the pigs; I lose my eye-sight, and regain it again. I don't know what life is, Ola, but I'm holding on to it. Thus speaks the narrator of Rafał Wojasiński's novel *Olanda*. Awarded the prestigious Marek Nowakowski Prize for 2019, *Olanda* introduces us to a world we glimpse only through the window of our train, as we hurry from one important city to another: a provincial world of dilapidated farmhouses and sagging apartment blocks, overgrown cemeteries and village drunks; a world seemingly abandoned by God — and yet full of the basic human joy of life itself.

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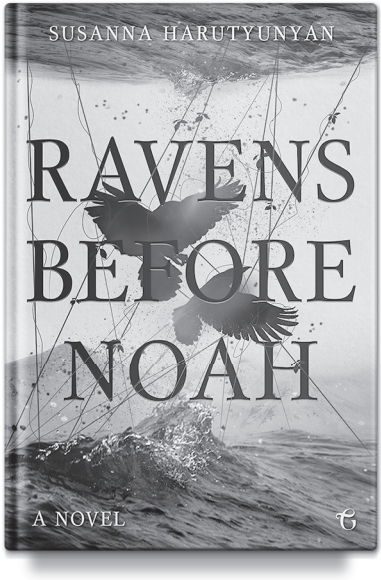
Ravens before Noah

by Susanna Harutyunyan



This novel is set in the Armenian mountains sometime in 1915-1960. An old man and a new born baby boy escape from the Hamidian massacres in Turkey in 1894 and hide themselves in the ruins of a demolished and abandoned village. The village soon becomes a shelter for many others, who flee from problems with the law, their families, or their past lives. The villagers survive in this secret shelter, cut off from the rest of the world, by selling or bartering their agricultural products in the villages beneath the mountain.

Years pass by, and the child saved by the old man grows into a young man, Harout. He falls for a beautiful girl who arrived in the village after being tortured by Turkish soldiers. She is pregnant and the old women of the village want to kill the twin baby girls as soon as they are born, to wash away the shame…

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Bera and Cucumber is a series of eight linked short stories. The links between them are manifold and include emigration to Israel and elsewhere, the Old Testament, and the sea. However, by far the main connection is the cosmopolitan city of Odesa, specifically the Jewish quarter, with its many and varied inhabitants and their professions, both legal and illicit. There are also many references to the famous landmarks of the city, as well as its trams, shops and suburbs.

The language of these stories, which are here translated into English for the first time, mixes Russian, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Hebrew and the unique Odesa dialect. In the title story Korotko even invents a language, possibly to represent what the latter sounds like to a non-Odesite.

Alexander Korotko was born into a Jewish family in Korosten, northern Ukraine, in 1952 and is a graduate of the Odesa National Economics University. A prolific writer of both poetry and prose, his work has been translated into numerous languages and he has received many honours and awards. His *War Poems* was published by Glagoslav in 2022. He now lives in Kyiv.

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