[Wednesday, January 2, 2013]

In general, the poet had a strange attitude towards death. He had lived through her once, when she held him in her dark embrace for seven days and seven nights. She had seemingly released him, but from then on she followed him no matter where he went and what he did. It was for this reason death had become tedious—because she perpetually reminded him of herself. It was enough to simply look in the mirror. Or to feel the guilt-ridden horror in the eyes of those who saw him for the first time . . . Only Mila had not so much as flinched when she had met him at the corner of Legé and Dondukov on that December day in nineteen seventeen. Only she had not been even the slightest bit repulsed by the hideous dark abyss behind the black bandage he wore then, or by the disheartening marks all over his entire face.

And the poet would never forget that.

[Thursday, January 3, 2013]

The reminder of death’s nod most infuriated him while he was in the midst of giving one of his lectures. Whether it was because of the intensity, the penetrating smell of floor oil in those claustrophobic community center salons, or because of the muted lighting above the stand on which he had his papers, as soon as he reached the pinnacle of the discourse, tiny rivulets of amber mucus would trickle down his right cheekbone. Agitated, he would briskly turn his back to the concerned audience, take off his glasses with the darkened right lens, wipe his face with two rapid motions, then shake the forelock of hair back into place above his right eye and start back up exactly where he had left off. But he’d become petulant in the process, coming across as if he were now yelling at his audience rather than giving a speech on expressionism and futurism.

At any rate, the Dutch doctor from Leiden, Johannes Esser, esteemed member of the Berlin University and a talented plastic surgeon, had done an outstanding job, but the German-made glass eye was overwhelmingly uncomfortable, and the poet had bought another from the specialty optical atelier Schlesinger & Co. on Alabinska Street.

All in all it was as though death somehow lived inside of him, in the pulsating pain above the right brow and in the piercing pain in his chest where Esser had cut off a chunk of his rib to put in his forehead, replacing what had been blasted away by the British shrapnel. But from there on, his brain was covered only by skin. If it weren’t for the forelock of hair everyone would see the pulsating
blue veins below. He only had to sit bent over his writing table for an hour before his head began throbbing with unbearable pain. In moments like these, he’d ask himself whether it wouldn’t have been a good idea to have stayed for those last two surgeries in Germany as the good doctor Esser had suggested one February day in nineteen seventeen. But he, still sunken into a sticky, tar-like sweat following yet another dose of anesthesia had only shot back: “Not a chance! This is it for me. Are fourteen operations not enough? No more—I’m leaving! . . . Let whatever happens, happen.” The doctor had then turned to Mila, attempting to convince her. “My dear lady,” he assured her. “It is only a matter of one more surgery! I promise you, he will have his looks back. Tell him, I beg of you!” But the poet snapped that his wife would never disagree with her own husband, and on the first of March they set off to Budapest from Berlin. From there, on to Orșova, and from Orșova, to Lom, and after twenty days of trains, hotels, and cruise liners, they arrived back in Sofia . . .

The pain got to him, but the poet walked around with the dark pride of a swan to spite it. Occasionally, he’d trip up since he couldn’t judge the height of steps . . . Or he’d look both ways nervously before venturing to cross the tram-filled boulevard. And so it went.

In that respect, death really did live his life alongside him. At home, nobody had raised the subject for ages. He’d forbidden them to. His only concerns were the magazines, the books, the printers, and the zincographers—who never managed to get the engraving plates for the vignettes and the illustrations right, the inks, the paper, and the booksellers . . .

And then the money, which was never enough for any of these things.

[Friday, January 4, 2013]

. . . The idiots assessing his verdict in Gorna Dzhumaya, all those Vanchos, Ionkos, and Peros had shut themselves in the other room to decide his fate, and he had been left alone with two of their goons. They had dark faces and reeked uncontrollably, glaring at him with empty opium eyes. He knew their type—they killed without a second thought.

“There was no first thought to speak of,” perhaps he had thought to himself and vowed to remember the joke so he could share it with the poet in the coming days. Maybe he could include it in one of his poems or in an enraged diatribe.

There was no way for him to know that another group of angels with short black jackets had already cracked the poet’s skull with a bludgeon thick as a man’s arm. That’s how it went down: the others just got strangled, but him, they shattered his skull first.

The poet’s skull had cracked from the left temple all the way to the nape of the neck with just the first hit, but the goons kept going until they broke him entirely. Then they threw a black rag over his face and only then did they finish
him off—strangling him like they did everyone else, with the nearby rope prepared for this very occasion.

[Saturday, January 5, 2013]

Meanwhile, he sat with his hands tied in a room that reeked of rotting wood, soured wine and opium. It was quiet and dark, save for the rusty voices scraping the silence in the next room over . . . The two goons across from him probably thought they’d done a good job frightening him to death, but they only made the whole thing tiresome for him. “What do I have left to be afraid of?” he thought.

He let out an impulsive laugh.

“Excuse me, friends. Have either of you ever taken a bath?” They froze.

“My apologies, gentlemen, I just couldn’t help but laugh when I saw you,” he continued. “You’re quite pungent. Do you at least change your underwear? Why am I even asking . . . You probably don’t wear any, do you? You probably put your breeches right on over your ass—and off you go, huh? Come on, you’re still young! The ladies are going to spit in your direction!”

He sighed and added that clean underwear is half the battle to good health.

“Civilization!” he went on. “How can you not love it?”

And the goons? One of them shot snot out of his nose and wiped his fingers on his leg, and the other spit out something unintelligible.

[Sunday, January 6, 2013]

The grey morrow followed on the thirtieth of May, but the Vanchos and the Ionkos kept on bickering in the room next door. He put his head down on the cot and fell asleep, all tied up. He’d been so exhausted, he slept for ten hours and by the time he awoke it had already darkened again. The goons across from him had changed but it was as though they were the same, like they’d come out of the same mother.

“What’s happening, druzia? Anything new?”

The goons groaned in lieu of a response and put a hand on the Mausers sticking out of their waist-belts.

“Nevermind,” he sighed. “I thought we could make some small talk and make the time go by faster, but I can see talking’s not your thing . . .”

He shrugged and shut his mouth and they stood there in silence as the night passed, all while the voices of the Peros and the Vanchos kept mumbling behind the locked door. They didn’t come into the room that night, nor did they come in the whole next day . . . In fact, they didn’t appear at the door again until late on the night of the thirty first of May, when, tired and sour, they informed him he’d
been sentenced. Then they nodded at yet another pair of goons to take him out of the house.

They took him out to a yard encircled by a stonewall, and either Vancho or Ionko, or some other of the tsar’s men in these combustible places cut his head off. The others then wrapped it in rags, put it away in leather saddlebags and stuffed his body back in the car.

All this happened at the precise hour in which the wrecked body of the poet was thrown, stuffed in a sack, from a black truck into a muddy hole by the Ilianski Base*. They threw a bit of garbage and five dead do . . .

[January 7, 2013, Monday]

. . . gs on top of it, so that if by some chance someone were to start shoveling around these parts—he’d see nothing more than a bunch of dog carcasses and wouldn’t try to dig any deeper.

[January 8, 2013, Tuesday]

Before I forget! . . . In the afternoon on that same fifteenth of May, when the agent took her husband away to the station for an inquiry, Mila Geo Mileva sent a telegram to her brother-in-law, Boris. She’d already been to the police headquarters to ask about him, but was told that such a person did not exist, which had made her very worried. She summoned Boris to Sofia immediately without revealing why . . .

Boris was, at the time, secretary to the Stara Zagora governor—Stavri Andreev someone or other. As soon as he received the dépêche from his sister-in-law, Boris’s heart sank. That year such telegrams were never a good sign. He knew how people disappeared that spring, he knew about the rogue agents**—he knew about *all of it!* For this reason the very first thing he did when he got the telegram was to call that same Stavri Andreev and ask him to arrange a meeting with the director of Public Safety in Sofia, Vladimir Nachev. Andreev picked up the phone at once and the man on the other end, Nachev, confirmed that Geo Milev was

* Located in Ilientsi, a location of many military bases. It was there that those murdered by the ‘rogue agents’ were buried. Since 1961, it is a residential district, and today it is an industrial and commercial region.

** Unidentified persons, who were in charge of murdering political opponents, much like the death squads in Latin America. The authorities used the term to justify the multitude of unsolved murders in 1925. Political agents abducted people in the middle of the night, performed tortures, and murdered, sometimes even in the street. Most of these doings were never admitted to by the government, but were rather blamed on these so-called ‘rogue agents’, as if the persons acted alone and answered to no one. In reality, they were army and police reserve executioners supported by the government which let them use their own buildings for murders and tortures—the Public Safety building, military establishments, police stations, and so forth.
indeed at the Police Headquarters, not to worry, but Boris nevertheless caught the overnight train to Sofia.

Early the next morning, now the sixteenth of May, he arrived at the train station while it was still dark and caught the first taxi, or maybe the first carriage, and went straight to Nachev. Not to the Police Headquarters but right to his house—because he and Nachev went back to the army days and had served together in the same regiment . . . Nachev, astounded, told him that his brother had never been there and who would tell him such a thing! Boris, even more astounded, reminded him of the previous night’s conversation with Stavri Andreev, but Nachev swore that he hadn’t spoken to Andreev in weeks! He went as far as to cross himself!

“Honest to God!” he said. “Boris! Brother! Don’t talk like that! Have I ever lied to you?!”

That is what he said and then gave his word that he would personally look into the whole thing and call Boris the very next day . . . Boris only let out a groan and went to Maria Luisa Boulevard to reassure Mila and Maria that everything would be all right.

But the next day had been a Sunday and of course Nachev hadn’t called, so on Monday Boris marched straight into Public Safety. There, Vladimir Nachev told him straight out that he had checked everywhere and now only the worst could be assumed: that his brother may have really been taken by lone-acting persons . . .

Boris erupted and asked what was it exactly that Nachev was insinuating? That his brother was done for and there was no use in searching for him?

“Is that what you are saying?” he yelled. “Or are you telling me that you can protect the Sakaros, Bakalos, and Kabakchievs* who have been propagating communism for years, and whom you now coddle and protect, because God forbid, what’s Europe going to say! but my brother, who is scarred from head to toe from fighting for this country, him you can leave in the hands of some ‘rogue agents’? Tell me this isn’t what you are saying!”

He went on, wondering what this pathetic country come to. He then pounded Nachev’s desk with his fist, and snapped that he could not stay secretary to the governor for one more second!

“Don’t be stupid.” Nachev said.

“Watch me!” Boris shouted back and slammed the door.

He then went to see Captain Kocho Stoyanov. He had served with him as well, and now the Minister of War, Valkov, and the other Minister, Russev, had made him the Police Marshall of Sofia.

* Bywords stemming from the names of Nikola Sakarov, Georgi Bakalov, and Hristo Kabakchiev. They were representatives of the communist party, whom the government detained, but never allowed into the hands of the ‘rogue agents’, probably because it considered them more collaborators than opponents.
This same Stoyanov jumped to his feet as soon as he laid eyes on him, and began bustling about, asking him how his father was, what had brought him here, but Boris said straight out:

“I am here to look for my brother—the writer Geo Milev!”

Kocho Stoyanov affected a very confused demeanor: “Oh, Geo Milev? He’s your brother? That same Geo Milev—your brother?”

When Boris looked into the eyes of this sometime friend from the regiment, he instantly knew—not only did this person know exactly where his brother was and what his fate had been but that he had personally ordered his execution. Boris felt the world collapse, his knees succumbing to a helplessness he’d never before felt—the realization that he would no longer be looking for his brother, he would be looking for his brother’s body. And that the most he could hope for now was to give him a proper funeral . . .