

Excerpt from the novel
SHE WHO REMAINS
by Rene Karabash

In the lap of the river

I hear it, a voice that whispers to me

*wash yourself, drink from your hands, put three handfuls of water in your lap,
dampen your apron and wipe your face*

I see the dress and shoes from grandma, the godparents leading the wedding procession, we walk along the black road, fog mixes with dust from the road, the two mountain men pass by, carrying sacks on their backs, no, surely they're carrying two bodies, a man and a woman, they don't greet us, stare at the tops of their shoes, I, dressed in grey light, with my patent leather shoes, grandma on one side, on the other - Nemanja, ugly, stooping and weak, everyone around us has rifles and pistols, their muzzles reach beyond the Accursed Mountains, the drum measures our steps, at the back my father and brother lead the horses on foot, my mother beside them, my mother is crying, a few unknown women in black walk behind them and wail, plucking at their hair and howling like jackals, am I getting married or being buried, I go into the room of my beloved Nemanja, where are you, boy, can I lie beside you for a while, I lie by my lover, he's handsome, in the dark of the room, his face disappears and reappears again, is that you, Nemanja, I love you, Bekia, but you don't know me, how will you love me, as it is in the Kanun*, take off your dress, I take off my dress, everyone is waiting silently outside the house, their bodies don't move, like stone, take off your shoes, I take my shoes off, someone cries *she's not pure*, the white sheet flaps through the window, the bride isn't pure, she's not virgin, she will die young, she's not pure, my brother cries, Bekia, sister, my father hits him in the mouth with the back of his hand, stupid girl, she asked for trouble, that's what comes, Nemanja takes the bullet from the trousseau, my father put it there, before he sent me away, everything according to the Kanun, if the bride is dishonoured, the bridegroom will shoot her with her father's bullet from the trousseau, everything according to the Kanun, everything according to the Kanun, the women in black pluck their hair and sway more vigorously, scratching their faces with their nails, they want to pull off their masks, change their faces, hoarse throats, wet headscarves, I don't hear the bells of the goats, *your golden hand, Nemanja, shoot, my son*, Nemanja aims and shoots me in the chest, I don't feel a thing, I'm still upright, on my dress a red spot

am I dying or being born

now everything will end, Nemanja goes out in front of the house, everyone claps silently, the village idiot comes into the room, is that you, Kuka, it's me, he lifts me off the bed in his arms and takes me out through the door, now I hear, the bells of the goats calm me,

**Kanun - a code of archaic Albanian laws*

Kuka swings me in his swing towards the lap of the river, the bells no longer ring for a wedding, the bells ring for death

*wash yourself, drink from your hands, put three handfuls of water in your lap,
dampen your apron and wipe your face*

I wake up

I get out of bed, crouch on the floor and bring out the chest for my trousseau from under the bed, the bullet's there, on top of my blue dress, tomorrow they will marry me, I take the bullet, go into the hall and push it into my father's coat, then I wake him up, I will become a sworn virgin, are you sure, sure, are you pure, pure

wake up your mother and Sale, we break off the wedding

The black ribbon

*ever since I was born
I've wanted mama to dress me
only in blue clothes
if she dresses me in other colours
I begin to cry
because still in my mother's belly
I heard different things*

like my father saying
*I want a son**

Bekia, mum, you will destroy us, how a sworn virgin, I want to, mum, then consider the honour of the bridegroom of the defiled, you will bring on a blood feud, you will destroy us, mother, you will destroy us, how a sworn virgin, we gave you everything, which devil entered your lap, shut up, witch, this is her will, according to the Kanun, she can turn away before the wedding and become a sworn virgin, she's not the first nor the last in this village, we will save the family's honour and blood will flow, whatever is so, the Kanun above all things, Bekia, choose, my father gives me the black ribbon

who says you can't touch death

you can, on the arm of someone fated for death, the black ribbon on the arm of every second person in the village, on everyone entered into a blood feud, on everyone who has to die, on everyone who has to kill, Nemanja has to kill a man from our family to get his honour back, Bekia, choose, me or your brother

my brother is crying, without tears on his face, my father is breathing heavily,

the Kanun has finally reached him, its highest law swells his chest, the law of honour, dad raises his left hand, my mother weeps, I look at my father's hand, if he could lift up his entire body for this honour, he does not want to die from illness or in his sleep, he want to die with two fingerprints of honour in the middle of his forehead, one movement of my hand and the picture collapses, Bekia, choose, the air thickens, the ceiling tilts

it shouldn't have to be like this

feed the snake, he is hungry
give it the milk-white bride

the heavy beams still closer to the two of them, I grab Sale's arm and put the black ribbon on it, my mother sobs as mothers sob when they realise their son has died at the front,

** son - in bulgarian this word is omonime, with two meanings, one for a son and one for the colour blue*

her long skirt sweeps across the room and curls behind the door like black smoke, the ceiling goes back up into place, the air begins to thin, breathing starts again

Sale doesn't move, he's no longer shaking, nor crying
Sale is already dead, because Sale isn't breathing

it's your will to preserve your masculinity, Sale, your will to defile it, my father says, he kisses my brother on the cheek and leaves the room

here's your son, Murash, here, you wanted son, here's your son, my mother howls in the cellar, her cries penetrate the whole house, pass through the beams above, cut through the ceiling, strike a tile of the roof, one sprays across the cement, a cat jumps into the boxshrub, my mother's cry carries over every house in the village and looks for an open window

The hollows

of the pigeons, me, my mother and my brother, my father loves the Kanun the most and he always acts so that everything happens according to its rules, when he comes to tell us that my brother has run away, he has already put the black ribbon on his arm, I still remember his eyes, they were both proud and dejected, for two days my mother endures the death of my brother, my father and Bekia, but nobody cared

a shadow is a shadow, you only notice it when you want to hide under it or when it blocks your path

I will get away

surely that's what my brother said to himself, as if I even hear him say it when I put the black ribbon on him, I don't remember much, surely he said it and only I heard him, the others, no, many times I have heard him say it like that, without even opening his mouth, I heard him say it even before he said *babi** for the first time

when my brother left, my mother carried on putting out four forks instead of three

habit is the strangest thing

Sale's pockets are always greasy, my mother washes them at the tap and is silent when a mother is silent, she knows, when a mother knows, she washes

silence sits on my brother's chair, in fact it's always been there, every time he sat there in its lap, while he ate, sometimes it stuck in his throat and he couldn't eat a scrap of it

your mother Karabashka, go make your lace

and don't stumble on the floor slab, you rake, the village says, what is this barmy son you give birth, mannequin from Buchenwald, sometimes the load was so much he can't get up from the table and he eats his dinner last, or gets up without eating, Sale's pockets are always greasy

Sale's gone, he's run away

says the black ribbon on my father's arm, and he, leaden with pride that he's entering into a blood feud and that he will not die of old age or illness, he begins to sink heavily onto the floor, for me it's an honour, I'm going to make a new pigeon loft, bigger than the first, the biggest pigeon loft in Albania, the boards beneath my father grind their teeth, the worms burst from them and search for a way out between the cracks, how gone, my boy, Sale, my mother covers her mouth with her hand, presses it hard against it

**babi* - father in Albanian language

through the window, a brown rabbit jumps out of a bush, I pray my father won't see it, give me the rifle, woman

at the table, my father, me and my mother, bread, braised rabbit, wine and four forks

the habit is the strangest thing

Sale's chair is empty, a rifle leans against Sale's chair, two hollows in the shape of shoes gape in the floor, a fly's landed in one of them

it fly away

Besa*

the heralds had already announced to Nemanja's family that there would be no wedding, on their part they sent them to tell the village that Nemanja's brother would avenge the insult to his brother, who raises his hand takes vengeance, Nemanja's brother raises his hand first, such is the law, this was the most dangerous time because they hadn't yet given my father *besa* and Nemanja's family could shoot any of us they wanted, you lock the doors so you don't go out of the house today, I've fed the animals, they won't die for a day without food, at dawn I'll send Preng to ask for a short besa, besa is the Albanian's temporary pardon, during the time of besa those who should take vengeance don't have the right to kill their victim, once the besa ends, it must begin, the short besa is for twenty four hours, Preng asks for short besa, they gave it to him, the next day the village gave my father long besa, a month, long besa is given after the funeral of the dead member of the family that is taking revenge, but we hadn't killed anyone from Nemanja's family and there was no funeral, so my father had the right to long besa, a blood feud is something strange, the families begin to kill each other until the tenth generation, the heralds spread news of the besa through the whole village

the village has to know

it always has to know what is happening in the pigeon loft, its eye is watching you

they have given Murash long besa, long besa for the ex mayor of the village, they gave him long besa because of his daughter Bekia, ruining Nemanja's wedding, becoming a sworn virgin, Murash's besa begins, after a month Murash will die, he's already a goner, he's a goner, the one thing my father said when Preng brought him the news about the long besa was - I want to make a new pigeon loft, bigger than this one, I will build the biggest pigeon loft in Albania, everyone does things like that during the time of besa or mends something in the house, or marries if they don't have a wife, or cultivates the land, or gets drunk from morning till night, curses and kills the flies on the table

my father could now begin building the pigeon loft and, as I say, he did just that, that's how he was, from morning to night he cut boards, hammered, sawed, laid bricks, painted, he started sitting down with us for dinner all the more rarely, my father's life was no longer divided between before he was mayor and after he was mayor, but before besa and after besa, anyway for him life was one thing - the pigeon loft

when you kill, you have to take a blood tax of 500 lek to the fortress at Elbasan, it will take you three days to get there and you will wait for a week for them to collect the tax if you have to, the blood captain is there, the prince, everyone is under his power, laws don't bind the Kanun, madam, governments fall, others rise, the laws of the Kanun are cast in bronze, it's no accident they date from the bronze age, I'm proud that I live on these lands, don't talk to me about loneliness, freedom is more important, I have no brother, no father, if it comes to

**Besa - the Albanian temporary pardon, part of the Kanun's vendetta*

the word of the Kanun, its laws stand above everything, even above these great mountains over there, male honour is important, so you protect the family's honour

one time a coward broke the besa, he'd killed, while the besa was still running, idiot, the whole village passed judgement, they burnt down his house and pulled out a stone from each of the four sides of its foundations, they cut him down in front of the village and nobody

took revenge for him, but to my mind expulsion from the family is worse than death, do you want me to tell you what would have happened to my brother, if I hadn't put the ribbon on his arm, he would have stayed alive, my father would have been killed, but he would have to avenge my father's death and, do you know, madam, he wouldn't have done it, shoot, Sale, then according to the Kanun, the village, my mother and I would expel him, to give him coffee under knee, with the left hand, he wouldn't have the right to marry, to cultivate his land, the village would cut down the trees in our garden, he wouldn't have the right to eat with us and, as the head of the family, I would have to tie him to his own home, until he doesn't revenge for his father, I couldn't have taken all that, to torture my own brother myself, but he knew, he knew very well, that in the world of the Kanun only the strong survive, and he wasn't one of them, to serve the Kanun requires manliness, your will to preserve your masculinity, it's your will to defile it, Sale, my father says, kissing my brother on the cheek and leaving the room

I will make the biggest pigeon loft in the village, in the final days of his besa he worked all the later because time was running out, and he still had a lot of work to do, The Mad - the goatherd - said that Murash was now sleeping in the pigeon loft, and his wife howled every evening, The Mad saw him come out of the pigeon loft every morning as he passed through the half-light towards the goat shed, but Murash didn't see him, I don't see anything, anything, only the pigeon loft, my father go into the pub and the latches on the faces of his friends went click

Sobbing

in the last days my mother sleeps alone,
in the evening I hear how she raves,
calls the names of every pigeon, Archangel,
where are you, save us, the devout
then I hear my father's name,

nothing more after that
nothing

The deer

I raised the gun and aimed it at its head

the body fell, I heard how it pitched into the damp litter,
and its great eyes, staring at me,

it shouldn't have happened this way

bravo, Bekia, you hit a nice-looking deer, my father comes up to me, looks at the still living deer on the ground, looks at me and slaps me, his hand scalds my cold cheek, he takes my gun and gets in the car, he doesn't speak to me all week, you don't kill bucks and does, didn't I tell you several times, these are blessed creatures, killing them is a great sin, fine, so how is a deer different to a rabbit, why can you kill rabbits, but not bucks and does, that's how it is in nature, there are rules you don't question, empty the last container and don't let me hear anymore, I empty the container of waste oil into the big pit in the forest, that's what my father and I did, a merchant who was passing sold us cheap containers of waste oil, we poured them into shallow trenches in the forest, wild pigs bathed in them and we could tell where they went by their tracks, whether towards the maize by the dike or the hill, in the direction of Barganesh, some of them went into uncle Stiche's alfalfa, Murash, come with your gun in case they come in again, damn them, I'm coming, he waits in ambush all evening, behind the bushes or in the hollow, by nightfall there's nothing to be seen, apart from the fog and the mass of the Accursed Mountains, and the cross on the wooden church, bent to one side by the wind, you stand without moving, at dawn a large dark spot emerges from the fog, it raises the gun and aims at my father's head, greetings from my brother, the warm body falls dully into the litter, his great eyes, staring at him, the great eyes of my father, staring into the eyes of Nemanja's brother, bravo, Bekia, you hit a nice-looking deer

at dawn a large dark spot emerges from the fog, he's waited in ambush all evening, to kill it, rubbing his hands together so they don't freeze, chewing bacon and garlic, drinking raki*, waiting for the great eyes of my father to stare into the eyes of his killer, waiting for him to say something to him before killing him, as it is in the Kanun, before you kill the one you have to kill, you must say something, whatever, something like well met, Murash, greetings from my brother or

dad, I want to become a sworn virgin

*Raki - Albanian strong alcoholic drink

Second letter

Dear Bekia,

I haven't had anything from you. I hope you're well. I've already been to the post office to check that my letter had reached you. They said yes. You got scared. That's probably why you still haven't written anything. Fine. Don't reply. I'll write to you. If I've been quiet until now, I now need to speak because there are things clogging up inside me. Things that stick like a growl in my throat, that make me an accomplice to everything that's happened. An accomplice to the murders committed. Including your own.

Yesterday I had rabbit stew for lunch in the restaurant next door. I was sure it wouldn't be nicer than mum's stew. And that's probably why I thought about that incident I think about sometimes. Do you remember when Murash found a wild rabbit in Nura's pen. Nobody could figure out how it had got in. But that didn't matter. I expected anything from Murash and I thought that he had caught it in the forest to play a game with us, you know, right, he loved to set us different tasks to set us one against the other. Or to give us tasks that you'd always beat me at. Naturally you took to shooting a rifle better than me. 'Put it in a sock and keep it by the stove to warm it up because it's frozen.' Do you remember? I'm not condemning Murash or his intention to save the rabbit, but you know yourself that the better he was, the worse he was. And so I expected anything from him. But not from you. Now I realise that your actions have always been unpredictable, but back then you were young and I believed you without question. Do you remember what happened to the rabbit? I still wonder why you told Murash I killed it. I remember very well that mother called me to strain the milk, and when I came back, Murash shouted for me and then you know what happened, I slept face down for two nights because I couldn't lie on my back. At night I kept turning the same way and I couldn't find a spot, but not because I'd been beaten with a belt, but because I was thinking. I was thinking all night why you said that I'd killed the rabbit, why you had done that. When it was starting to get light outside, I went to sleep. Without an answer to the question. But I think that it obviously wasn't enough for you to be 'daddy's boy', you wanted to be something more than that, daddy's boy, who wanted to save the rabbit from your brother's clumsy hands. You were Murash's favourite. He only had one son. And that was you. But things just don't stay like that, sis. And I'll try to make you understand that everything you did to become 'daddy's boy' has been in vain and that the Kanun is a fiction that gives you certainty, but not freedom. These days I think a lot about forgiveness. I think we'll find peace in our souls when we forgive each other for everything. But before that the truth. And so I ask you again: what happened in the dairy that night when you were late?

*I look forward to your letter,
Sale*

19.09.2017

Sofia

Bulgaria

The lie like a worm

lies

you believe the letter or me, I wanted one thing, but something else happened

it shouldn't have happened like that, I wanted to help him, just like you're watching me, is it a lie, my stomach hurts, will you pass me the coffee pot from the sill beside you, he killed it, the lie like a worm in the apple

children, put it in a sock and keep it by the stove to warm it up because it's frozen, my father comes into the room, holding something in his big hand, hurry up, I've still got work to do in the garden, Sale reaches out a hand towards dad, I reach out a hand towards dad, both of us with one voice, give it to me, our father gives it to me, I feel the soft body in my hand, put it in a sock, and I take small steps towards the stove, my brother overtakes me, give it to me to hold, he strokes it, he smiles at it, he talks to it as if it's human, he asks it whether it has friends, then strokes it again, hurry up, fetch a sock, I say to my brother, my brother brings a large grey woolly sock from somewhere, patched on the heel with red cloth, we put the rabbit in it, Sale, come to strain the milk, right away, mum, Sale, I won't say it again, he goes out and as he goes out he looks at the rabbit, before disappearing through the doorway, I hold the sock in both hands, the stove begins to make my hands hot, wake up, rabbit, hot, lots of heat, wake up, rabbit, the stove, the rabbit in my hands, wake up, rabbit, the rabbit's no longer cold, the rabbit is hot

it was my brother, the lie like a worm

the sock drops to the ground, I crouch down, pick it up, straighten it, the rabbit doesn't move, Sale comes in, my brother the stove, my father, right, the rabbit dies, I crouch down and return it to the ground, I straighten up, my father comes in, my brother, the rabbit, the stove, who killed it

Sale killed it, the lie like a worm

I crouch down, pick up the dead rabbit, give it to dad, Sale killed it, Sale killed it, suffocated it, then kicked it into the stove, he was so rough with it, he said that it's not natural for rabbits to be with people, they're meant to be killed, to be eaten

Murash cries with joy, he grabs Sale's face, plants a kiss on his mouth and puts him on his shoulders, my mother puts a bouquet of wild geraniums behind his ear, Murash stands up, my mother cries and pats my brother on the leg, my father goes barefoot along the black road to the village, carrying Sale on his shoulders, my Sale killed the rabbit, my little Sale is a real man, daddy's boy, he killed it with his little hands, he kicked it with this foot, kiss him, the whole village walks behind them, the village kisses Sale's feet, the village rejoices, the village celebrates, waves white cloths at them, the road turns white where they pass, everyone hugs and cries, he will be my gun, my bullets, may your son be alive and well, Murash, and let a gun shoot him down, the lie like a worm, it should have been like that, but it happened differently

was it you, you little bastard, my father takes the belt, come, let me show you how I kill little beasts, there'll be no dinner for you tonight, go to your room, something moves in the darkness of the garden, my brother said nothing to me the next day, as if nothing had happened, at one time I even thought I'd been dreaming because everything was as it always had been before, I went hunting with my father, Sale prepared our packs, two slices of bread, bacon and onion in my father's, a little onion and water, we waited in ambush for a long time, nothing appeared, we were silent throughout the whole ambush, at one point my father said

he would die anyway

young wild rabbits can't live with domestic ones,
why, I don't know, he said, it's nature

then why bring it home, when you knew it would die
let's go, rain's coming

Third letter

Dear Bekia,

I hope the reason you haven't replied to me is not because something bad has happened to you. They told me in our post office that my second letter reached you. I'm beginning to wonder whether to carry on writing to you when I get no reply ... Such questions find their way into my head. Whether I will see you again one day, whether in fact you're alive ... my dear sis ... I'm trying to believe that you're well and that one day you will visit me and I'll show you this other world, different from the world of the Kanun.

When I got to Sofia, I didn't have anything apart from two pullovers, a pair of trousers and a pair of shoes. You know how much I loved to dance on the flagstones at home, until the kids called me girlie and threw stones at me. I won't tell you how I got across the borders. At the Serbian one, I was beaten and robbed. They took the only money I had. When I arrived in Sofia, I asked where the main street was. I went there and put mama's red headcloth on the paving stones. I started dancing. I didn't have anything, apart from that headcloth, but I was free. And I danced. Nobody threw stones at me. People stopped and gave me money. I don't know how long I danced for, but in the end I stopped to feel my legs and then my whole body. I felt myself falling asleep dancing. I woke up because someone splashed water on my face. An elegant man with grey hair held me under the neck and wet my face with water. It turned out that he was a teacher of contemporary dance at one of the universities in Sofia. He told me he hadn't seen anyone dance like that for a long time. We could understand each other speaking English, you know that I learned a little from the television. He said he wanted to take me into his dance troupe and help me with work at the university. He said I had 'duende'. Later I learnt what he meant. At first I thought I was still sleeping, but then I realised. This was God. The man helped me to legalize my stay in the country, find a place to live, sign up for a course in Bulgarian and English and all the rest of it. After a few months I got into my stride. I couldn't believe that all this was happening to me. What had I done to deserve it? I'd been taught that I didn't deserve anything good and that I would always be guilty of something. Memories of the past lived on in my dreams. At first I dreamt about Murash's belt. Sometimes about how I stood with a rifle on lookout for the hawk. Another time I smashed down the maize and he punished me by making me kneel for hour after hour. Gradually the nightmares began to die away. Then they only came like shadows and sensations, without images. One night I dreamt about you and Dana. I won't forget that dream. You were small and naked and were swimming in a sea of milk. You were laughing. Then Murash appeared and drank up the sea with a reed for a straw. Dana turned into a fish and started hurling herself towards dry land and you turned into a white wolf and ran off into the forest. Then the fish sprouted wings and she flew off towards the forest too.

I remember you. When it was the two of us, everything around you disappeared, as if the world was made only for you. One time I hid in the mill. I heard how she read to you. She had the most beautiful voice I'd ever heard. Pity she went away ... I want to tell you something, but you're not giving me any sign that you hear me. I don't know whether this is my need to say these things, to make it easier for me, or to open your eyes. Whatever it is, I want us to get to the truth. To forgiveness for you and for me. Be honest with me. Please, Bekia. Tell me what happened that night in the dairy. Come to me and tell me. I shan't judge you, let's begin at the beginning. Like children. As once before ...

*Sale,
Sofia,*

Bulgaria
12.10.2017

stop the camera
enough for today

*

БЕКИА

Matja

No, I havent written Bekia, I wrote Matja
my name is Matja, don't you see what I wrote
Ma-tja

**БЕКИА - the name Bekia, written in Bulgarian language*

Moles

the words went away with Dana and my brother, and all the books she read to me over the summer holidays, when I stayed on without them, I stopped Albanian lessons, I can't write, nor read, I've read the best books through Dana's eyes, she read to me every evening in the mill, Dana wanted to become a writer, so she read and wrote a lot, and I've had pains in my stomach since I was small, they appear when something upsets me, the pains only disappeared when Dana read to me, nothing else helped

the village gossips that Bekia and Dana meet at the mill to read books, but who knows what they're up to, Murash, hasn't your daughter learned to read, so she goes to have books read to her, didn't the teacher already teach her

Dana was my mirror, my medicine, my salvation, God put a mole on both of us, where our collarbones meet, above the heart, so that we would recognise each other more easily and just as easily lose ourselves in each other forever

baba Tsane, won't Dana be coming to stay, get off with you, she's not here, you must stop coming here, don't you know that

suddenly

love, who here talks about love, in our lands love is equal to death
do you choose love, you're choosing death, or it chooses you, but you're always the last to realise it, before the pomegranates ripen and crack

Wild pomegranates

greetings from my brother

Murash has been shot, Murash is dead, Murash has been shot down in the wild pomegranates, in the wild pomegranates, Murash, Murash, Murash, my mother cries and sinks into her skirts beside the road, my life, Murash, the wind bears the cries of the heralds, the cries reach my mother on the black road home and strike her to the earth, my mother sinks into her skirts beside the road, four strong men walk along the black road home, carrying my father's body on four beech branches, the road is uneven, the bearers, stooping, stumble, my father's body rises and falls as if coughing, they lay it at my feet and it no longer moves

come, Matja, the bearers are mumbling into their jackets, they don't look me in the eye, they don't want to see the death of the father in the eyes of the daughter, they would rather watch death in the father's eyes, but never in the eyes of his daughter, they want to lie peacefully in their beds, and I must stay upright, not lose control over my body, spit, and say,

what are you bringing me, wounded or dead

my mother comes in through the big door and throws herself on my father, she kisses his white face, still warm hands, she'd gone to pick wild pomegranates, wounded or dead, she had wanted to make something sweet with wild pomegranates, before she got there, the village said that Murash left after her, where is your mother, in the wild pomegranates, she shouldn't do that, he wanted to speak to her, to tell her something, before leaving, some kind of secret that only they knew, he wanted to see her, for her to be with him when the rifle shot him down, the village says that male pigeons go mad if you leave them alone

wounded or dead

dead

the bearers say, my mother throws herself on my father and the pomegranates from the bag roll across the cement

You can not make jar from the wild pomegranates, says one of the bearers
they never get ripped like people

Black scarves

the soul of the dead cannot find peace until blood is spilt in vendetta

a good rifle has fired

says the *guzla** player and hangs my father's shirt on the fence

when the mark on it turns yellow, the dead want vengeance, in Nemanja's house and in our house people come and go, the yard turns black with scarves, someone carves a cross on the gate with a chisel, the blows return like an echo from Nemanja's house, someone is carving a cross on their brown door too

black scarves wave on the road like an anthill, black scarves scratch their faces, they want to tear their face off with their scarf, they walk behind the cart, Murash lies in it, arms crossed, two stones propping his elbows so they don't fall, as if he's praying, black scarves cry, they can't tear off their faces, their boots sink into the mud, the scarves do what they have to do, and so they are here to mourn the dead, the undertaker and the stonemason haul the cart

the rain is coming

says the gravedigger to the stonemason, I haven't brought in the sheep, says the stonemason to the gravedigger, I look back and watch them, then I look at my mother, the shadow beside me that's wearing a cross, behind the black scarves like a tail the drummer drags his feet, there, where the drumstick has struck, the skin of the drum has turned black, only he remained alive, the others remembered, says the gravedigger to the stonemason, there were no people left, soon we won't have a drummer, when I see how he drags his feet, a fly lands on my father's forehead, the same fly, from the holes in the floor, in the shape of shoes, the gravedigger throws in the last spadeful of soil, leans the spade against a cross, the stonemason gives him a cigarette, spits to the side and says

The rain has passed us, but it caught the sheep
one of them's driving me crazy, I'll have to slaughter it soon

Nemanja and his brother are at the table at home, they've come for the funeral feast, as it says in the Kanun, the killer sits and eats with the family of the dead, I put bread on the table and sit down, Nemanja's brother stands opposite me, a rabbit stew steams between us, everyone's buried in their plates, anyone looking in at the window wouldn't see the two brothers' heads, their bodies eat at the table without heads, a rabbit stew steams in front of them, their bodies steam, the powder's exploded, their shoulders move like the shoulders of a scrawny jackal stalking a rabbit, a fly lands on Nemanja's hand, he brushes it off, the same fly from my father's forehead, it lands on Nemanja's brother's hand, he stops chewing, his mouth is full, his

**guzla* - Albanian stringed musical instrument

cheeks bulge as if it's full of stones, his nose whistles when he breathes, he deftly grabs the fly with his left hand, hold it in his fist and throws it to the ground, the fly falls into the indentation in the floor that looks like the indentation of someone's shoes

through the window, a brown rabbit jumps out of the bushes, I pray my father sees it and says

give me the rifle, woman,
but the two empty chairs gape like rotten teeth in the mouth of the room
and I know that new ones won't appear in their place

Nemanja and his brother get up from their seats, simultaneously wipe their mouths with their right hands and leave us, the blood feud continues, now one of them must be killed with the bullet in my father's pocket

wedding or funeral - wound

but sworn virgins don't kill
the feud is over

The razor

the cracked mirror over the sink

the gaps in it mark my face, I raise my head, look at where the Adam's apple rises in my throat, I hold the razor right there, ever since I was born I've heard different things, ever since I was born, I've been waiting for this, this touch that will erase the past once and for all, I squeeze the razor, you deserve it, one thing leads to another, everything that happens is real, isn't it, goodbye, Bekia, the blade moves down Bekia's right side and removes the foam from Matja's neck

Bekia, fetch the sandpaper, I hear my father
this pigeon loft won't be made by itself, I hear him

it's probably the mirror, I feel the cold razor on my neck, my hand moves it slowly, if only my father had seen me now, two months after the oath my cycle hasn't come and so it's been to this day, soft dark hairs are appearing on my breast and neck, I start to shave them, they're getting hard, sharp, I can feel them every time I run my hand over them, just as dad did

daddy's boy

my father's razor and Dana, staring at me with her white teeth, her silhouette still there, fixed on my retinas, an icon framed in the window, I'm drying my neck with the towel, I raise my head and check if I've not missed anything, here, as always, I never miss something, and this time

I haven't missed bleeding

The light

read me the last letter and go

the journalist opens the letter with a bread knife, the letter's still in the envelope, unopened, my heart races like a doe being chased by its shadow, this letter isn't from Sale, don't tell me that the ceiling is starting to break up into tiny pieces over my head, one piece falls into my coffee cup and leaves a black mark on the tablecloth, read, *it's written Dana, the name of Dana written on the envelope*, read, no, first Sale's letter, the reporter reads the letter from Sale and the glass in the windows smashes into smithereens, then she reads Dana's letter and the wall facing the street collapses completely, it's suddenly light in the room, extremely light, it's not easy to bear this light because it's abrupt, it slices through the whites of your eyes, you can't shield yourself from it even if you shut your eyes, and it's there, so powerful that for a moment you think to yourself that you're seeing the light for the first time, that up until now you've lived in the dark, the journalist realises she should not look at me, should not watch me, anyway she won't see me because I'm no longer there, I'm lost in the light, I wander through it, the reporter feels deep shame and discomfort being with me in the room, she knows that now is the moment when she should leave and leave me with the light, nobody deserves to read this, nor to hear these letters, sheets of paper that smash windows, knock down walls, after these two letters nobody will stay in this house any longer, this house doesn't deserve its inhabitants, the house has been silent the whole time, has kept its severed tongues locked in a box full of letters, and I haven't understood anything, nothing, so many years, nothing

that's how it is when you decide your life is worth more than that of others
when you realise you've been the worm in the apple and because you rot every apple
near you starts to rot

I wonder whether the God I've prayed to up until now exists at all, does anyone hear
the little stone in the well of death, I'm guilty of everything, if that evening I hadn't

that was it, it's over
if the remaining three walls of the house collapse now, I won't hear them
because I no longer hear, I only see this penetrating light that invades my body in
waves

am I dying or being born

Now I know

I am the red stone in Sale's hands
the stream of blood on my father's calf
his footprints sunk into the floor
my bleeding mother
the bloodied shirt in the yard
the lamb hanging from the walnut tree
swinging gently from the breeze
Dana's red cheeks
in whose dimples I sank and stayed
once

and forever

I'm leaving

sixteen years ago I killed Bekia
today I will kill Matja too

the lowing of the cow, a bonfire of belongings in the middle of the room, the wall fell, didn't it, I light the fire inside because inside is already outside, the fire spits pictures and letters at the ceiling, the words flitter in ash, mum and dad's heads fly over me, black butterflies, if they touch the earth, they'll turn into dust, the fire's burning fingers caress me, I'm wearing my father's coat, the bullet inside it

why did it happen like that

my father's coat, the bullet inside it, passport, dress, patent leather shoes, the shoes like artificial limbs, keeling over at every step, scarecrow, mum and dad's heads fly over me, black butterflies, if they touch the earth, there'll turn to dust, the moo of the cow disarms me, I grit my teeth and tell the neighbour two big bowls of oats before sunrise, a bale of hay in the evening and a bucket of water, just so, the milk, if you want, take it to the dairy, if you want, make cheese, you know how to look after a cow, the neighbour hods his head, he knows how to look after a cow, Nura looks at me with great wet eyes, spittle drips from her nostrils, when will you come back, the lowing of the cow disarms me, I grit my teeth and say, I don't say anything, what you see is murder, I think to myself, but I don't say anything, I send her away with my hand and she goes

there's one thing left to do, to open the pigeon's cages, I go through all the catches on the little doors, I turn them back, in the direction of the past, it's nothing this thing I do twice a day, now it's a celebration, today it's a ritual because I'm doing it for the last time, perhaps, I let the birds free, even though I know they won't fly off, the pigeons always come back here where their first feathers were cut

home is where they cut your feathers

the path winds uphill, I won't turn back, whatever happens, I owe this to myself, to not turn back, but to continue upwards along the rocky way, to separate myself from something that I always had turned out to be more than easy and yet, my body turns at nostalgia's command, my home - my castle, my prison, from above the house looks like a pile of stones, the pigeon loft casts a shadow over it, there's dad, banging with a hammer, do you hear what Murash is saying, I will make the biggest pigeon loft in Albania, the house in the shadowy mouth of the pigeon loft, you can only see this from here, from a distance, from where I've got to at the moment, before the rugged cliff, before carrying on up and leaving everything behind my back

I'm leaving

Translated from by Tom Phillips