

RENE KARABASH (b. Irena Ivanova) is a Bulgarian poet, novelist, screenwriter, actor and playwright. She has won multiple plaudits for her work, including several Best Actress awards for her role in the film *Godless*. Her debut novel, *She Who Remains*, was awarded the 2019 Elias Canetti Prize, Bulgaria's most prestigious literary award. It has been translated into more than a dozen languages, and a film, adapted by the author, is set to be released in 2026. Karabash is also the author of the collection *Omar's Letters to His Future Wife*, and is working on her second novel.

IZIDORA ANGEL is a Bulgarian-born writer and literary translator based in Chicago. Her work has appeared in *A Public Space*, *Astra*, *Best Literary Translations*, *Chicago Reader* and elsewhere. She is the translator of Hristo Karastoyanov's *The Same Night Awaits Us All*, Nataliya Deleva's *Four Minutes* and Yordanka Beleva's *Keder*, for which she won a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. Angel received a PEN/Heim Translation Fund Grant and the Gulf Coast Prize in Translation for *She Who Remains*. She is completing her debut memoir, *Solomon's Daughter*, first excerpted in *The American Scholar*.

SHE WHO REMAINS

Rene Karabash

Translated from the Bulgarian by
Izidora Angel

PEIRENE

*when she puts me in anything but
because still in my mother's womb
I hear things
like my father saying
iskam sin*

*today my mother
put me in a blue dress
I crawled over to my father
to show him me
and he said, let me listen to the news
which must mean
I'm very beautiful*

*I don't understand,
can you tell me what this means:
hold on, let me listen to the news
and then this:
breaking news
a girl hanged herself
with her umbilical cord*

PART 1

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let's go out to the field.' While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?'

'I don't know,' he replied. 'Am I my brother's keeper?'

The Lord said, 'What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.'

GENESIS 4:8-12

The Heralds of Death

The Kanun was mightier than it appeared. It reached everywhere, crawled on the ground, along the boundaries of the fields, it slithered along the roads, around the markets, made the rounds at the weddings, scaled the alpine pastures, then reached higher, reached the sky, whence it returned as rain and filled the watercourses of the fields, the reason for a good third of the bloodshed.

ISMAIL KADARE
Broken April

my brother sends his best
says Nemanja's brother and shoots his gun just once
my father's warm body tumbles into the dead leaves,
his big eyes fixed on him, my father's big eyes locked
into Nemanja's brother's eyes, whose strong hands grab
my father and turn him to the setting sun, he's exalted by
the sight of his fingers in blood, wipes them on Murash's

shirt, the heralds of death spread the news, they shot Murash, Murash was killed, Murash was felled next to the wild pomegranate trees, next to the pomegranates, Murash, Murash, Murash, my mother wails and sinks into her skirt in the middle of the road, Murash, my life, the wind carries the howls of the heralds, the howls catch up to my mother on the dirt road leading up to our home and knock her down to the ground, she sinks into her skirt on the dirt road leading to our house, four broad-shouldered men stride up the dirt road to our home, carrying my father's body on four beech branches, the road is uneven, the pall-bearers' bodies are bent, they trip over their feet, my father's body rises and falls like a cough, they set the body down at my feet, it no longer moves, now I'm bound to ask everything the *Kanun* decrees, I have to ask the pall-bearers what I must ask them, I open my mouth, only hot air escapes, hot air into the cold stares of the bearers' faces, the hot air that is no longer escaping my father's lips, come on, Matija, they mutter into their collars, avoiding my eyes, they don't wish to see the death of the father reflected in the eyes of his daughter, they'd rather see death in the eyes of the man than in the eyes of his daughter, they want to lie in their beds tonight unperturbed, yet I have to stand, self-possessed, I clear my throat and I ask, what have you brought me
a wound or death

Bekija

I swear to the ruler of the Albanian Alps, Lekë Dukagjini,

that to my dying day, to my dying day I shall not touch a man, I shall not touch a man and I shall preserve my virginal innocence, renouncing for all times the woman in me

renouncing forever the woman in me

I will submit to this oath before God, I shall not succumb to the wicked desires of the flesh, and today, before the twelve-man council of elders, I shall take the masculine name Matija as my only given name and may the women cut off my hair and may my dresses turn to ash and may the clothes of a man become one with my back, my legs, my skin

my back, my legs, my skin

I swear, for as long as I am of sound body and mind, that I shall keep my oath, fastened together with my hair and my honour, as God, and these fathers, are my witnesses

I, Matija, the son, will look after my family, I will provide for them all that is needed, all that the *Kanun* decrees as necessary, for sloth is the enemy of the soul, and I will henceforth, at appointed hours, occupy myself with manual labour, for only when I live off what my hands have borne can I be a monk of principle, and if I blessedly keep this oath, and suppress indecent acts and not break my word, then may I enjoy a life that is long and may I be surrounded by universal reverence, and if I violate and desecrate this oath, may the opposite befall me

in the name of the sky and the earth, this stone, this weight and for this bread

I am sworn

Matija

I exit the church and for the first time in my life I feel the ice-cold Albanian air on my head, I must resemble a shorn donkey, my braids lie on the church floor, to part with something you've had forever turns out to be easy as the wind, now they'll burn my dresses too, down to the last one, except for my future wedding dress, the one my grandmother gifted me before she died, together with a pair of white patent-leather shoes, she'd laid out the dress next to the clothes she'd picked out for her own funeral, come here, child, she said, I want to give you something, but grandmother, I said, there are two dresses here, which one is for me, she and I were the same height, she died after she slaughtered a sick baby goat and its blood poisoned hers, here, my child, she said, take this as dowry for the wedding, both dresses were beautiful, one was a red velvet, the other sky blue, I went for the blue one, the shoes were shiny and white, *Bekija*, you took the wrong dress, put

it back, I've picked out this one for when I depart this earth, no, grandmother, that's the one I like, I hate red, you take it, here, take it, I never once wore that dress, it's still in the cupboard with the white patent-leather shoes, I hid them before my oath so they wouldn't burn them, I almost wore them once, at my wedding, it was set to take place at the same church where my female self and I got separated

there's no turning back now

I exit the church and for the first time in my life I feel the ice-cold Albanian air, I must resemble a shorn donkey, so what, I tell myself, the most precious metal in Albania is freedom, around here a woman's worth is measured in oxen, don't look men in the eye, don't go to the pub, mind the children, wash the clothes, cook, the most a woman can hope for is to bring the milk to the dairy, Bekija's murder is the smartest thing I ever did, they gave me a shotgun and a watch, now I can smoke and drink and move with the men, go to the pub and visit the men's social clubs, they teach me to stand like them, legs apart, the kids in the neighbourhood begin to call me Bate Matija, I roam the narrow streets of the village every night practising my new walk, getting used to it, getting used to my now immeasurable worth, getting used to wearing a watch, daddy's boy

your father wanted a son, but out came you
shush, Mother, Matija appeared on the same day, I just waited for him to undress me, to dress me in his clothes, to put his watch on my wrist, there's no more Bekija, her hair floats in the river, do you know what, Mrs Journalist, we, us people, need rules and boundaries, I think it's precisely what we need, I don't know what it's like where you're from, but here freedom is a dangerous thing

the whole village knows

Murash wanted a son, but it was a daughter he got

they all want sons in these lands, the blood tax is killing the men and there's no one left to look after men's things, I take a man's name, Matija, as my one and only given name

I exit the church and for the very first time I feel

I walk home, I must see whether the dress and the shoes are still there in the cupboard, the Accursed Mountains stand on all sides of me, the Albanian Alps, the Accursed spread out across thousands of kilometres, it doesn't matter which direction I head, there's the rooted army of evil rock, mobilized by the hands of the devil, the sky leans on the soldiers' shoulders, do you hear the cowbells – the evening church bells of the village, and then rain, not cascading but misting, it rains incessantly and it won't let up, it's raining now