

Border

By Kapka Kassabova

Granta

REVIEW BY STEPHEN KEELER

Let us begin with naming of parts. A preface is often little more than the unconsidered fulfilment of a careless expectation, a kind of packaging; at best maybe a labelling, at worst a grab for celebrity endorsement, however misguided.

Kapka Kassabova will have none of that. Her preface to *Border* is exemplary in its philosophical and psychological scene-setting. Perhaps mind-setting is a better term.

The border – specifically the remote borderlands of Bulgaria, Turkey and Greece – is ‘aggressive’, ‘prickly’; it hums ‘with the frequencies of the unconscious’, and it is an invitation, perhaps a dare. It is another country. They do things differently there.

Thus alerted, and after a brief postcard from Soviet era Bulgaria, we return with her after a thirty-year absence to Burgas airport with a plane-load of ‘consumer tourists’. And if even the least susceptible reader hasn’t by now been enchanted by Kassabova’s prose, this is where resistance becomes futile: every paragraph is embedded with a poem. At the airport, ‘vineyards lined the landing strip and the air smelled of petrol and imminent sex’; the excited Russians and other pale northerners are ‘packed off like canned meat to the pulsing resorts’, and there is the smell of ‘ripening figs, of dusty, lusting Nivea cream summer’ where ‘everything tasted like tears’, and wild horses canter along the road: ‘They separated to let my car through and closed behind me like a silent film.’

Kassabova has talked privately of losing interest in her own poetry but she couldn’t write an unpoetic line if her life depended on it, and if the poetic charge of the prose occasionally threatens to blur the thesis, the delight in the imagery or the pitch of the metaphor more than compensates. This is a beautiful book to read.

The narrative is occasionally (and appropriately, given the nature of these borders) fragmentary. It can be insightful to choose to see this as the writer singing for her supper, or Scheherazade-like rationing her stories in the interests of self-preservation. There is too an occasional whiff of the Buchanesque in devices which tease like a thriller with the promise of more (‘We’ll return to the

gold'; 'Knowing these facts about Strandja felt like a good start – until I arrived in the Village in the Valley').

There are exotic and possibly mythical place-names; there are women with the evil eye, and there are old men who sit motionless and insubstantial as ash. And there are the sudden horror-movie thrills of disarming unease – 'in the forest you are never alone'.

There is the anticipated but never clichéd rustic wisdom of women – 'a life of books and hills is the only meaningful life' – and there is the heartbreak of the mayor who 'loved his village so much that he had built a playground for the absent children'. For this is also a ghost story or a story of ghosts: ghosts from ancient times, from the Ottomans, the Balkan Wars, the Soviet and even post-Soviet eras. And much of the text reads as though in sepia with Kassabova distinguished from it in a kind of muted colour, as though shot on already-fading East German ORWO.

Border is a timely contemplation in these uncontentplative times. Kassabova's tales illuminate universal absurdities: revolutions that aren't, segregations that fail to separate, borders to hold us in as much as to keep 'strangers' out. It is a parable for today, and probably, alas, for tomorrow too. We are reminded, at the outset, by a 'Gypsy singer' that 'we are only guests on this earth...we come on to it naked and depart with empty hands.' We might do well, therefore, (Kassabova doesn't quite exhort us) to remember the enigmatic and perhaps ambiguous stone inscription from the second century BC, *in Greek*: 'Stranger, you who come here, be well!'

[630 words]

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