# The Bulgarian Poetess

# John Updike

“YOUR POEMS. Are they difficult?”

She smiled and, unaccustomed to speaking English, answered carefully, drawing a line in the air with two delicately pinched fingers holding an imaginary pen. “They are difficult—to write.”

He laughed, startled and charmed. “But not to read?”

She seemed puzzled by his laugh, but did not withdraw her smile, though its corners deepened in a defensive, feminine way. “I think,” she said, “not so very.”

“Good.” Brainlessly he repeated “Good,” disarmed by her unexpected quality of truth. He was, himself, a writer, this fortyish young man, Henry Bech, with his thinning curly hair and melancholy Jewish nose, the author of one good book and three others, the good one having come first. By a kind of oversight, he had never married. His reputation had grown while his powers declined. As he felt himself sink, in his fiction, deeper and deeper into eclectic sexuality and bravura narcissism, as his search for plain truth carried him farther and farther into treacherous realms of fantasy and, lately, of silence, he was more and more thickly hounded by homage, by flat-footed exegetes, by arrogantly worshipful undergraduates who had hitchhiked a thousand miles to touch his hand, by querulous translators, by election to honorary societies, by invitations to lecture, to “speak,” to “read,” to participate in symposia trumped up by ambitious girlie magazines in shameless conjunction with venerable universities. His very government, in airily unstamped envelopes from Washington, invited him to travel, as an ambassador of the arts, to the other half of the world, the hostile, mysterious half. Rather automatically, but with some faint hope of shaking himself loose from the burden of himself, he consented, and found himself floating, with a passport so stapled with visas it fluttered when pulled from his pocket, down into the dim airports of Communist cities.

He arrived in Sofia the day after a mixture of Bulgarian and African students had smashed the windows of the American legation and ignited an overturned Chevrolet. The cultural officer, pale from a sleepless night of guard duty, tamping his pipe with trembling fingers, advised Bech to stay out of crowds and escorted him to his hotel. The lobby was swarming with Negroes in black wool fezzes and pointed European shoes. Insecurely disguised, he felt, by an astrakhan hat purchased in Moscow, Bech passed through to the elevator, whose operator addressed him in German. “*Ja, vier*,” Bech answered, “*danke*,” and telephoned, in his bad French, for dinner to be brought up to his room. He remained there all night, behind a locked door, reading Hawthorne. He had lifted a paperback collection of short stories from a legation windowsill littered with broken glass. A few curved bright crumbs fell from between the pages onto his blanket. The image of Roger Malvin lying alone, dying, in the forest—“Death would come like the slow approach of a corpse, stealing gradually towards him through the forest, and showing its ghastly and motionless features from behind a nearer and yet a nearer tree”—frightened him. Bech fell asleep early and suffered from swollen, homesick dreams. It had been the first day of Hanukkah.

In the morning, venturing downstairs for breakfast, he was surprised to find the restaurant open, the waiters affable, the eggs actual, the coffee hot, though syrupy. Outside, Sofia was sunny and (except for a few dark glances at his big American shoes) amenable to his passage along the streets. Lozenge-patterns of pansies, looking flat and brittle as pressed flowers, had been set in the public beds. Women with a touch of Western chic walked hatless in the park behind the mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov. There was a mosque, and an assortment of trolley cars salvaged from the remotest corner of Bech’s childhood, and a tree that talked—that is, it was so full of birds that it swayed under their weight and emitted volumes of chirping sound like a great leafy loudspeaker. It was the inverse of his hotel, whose silent walls presumably contained listening microphones. Electricity was somewhat enchanted in the Socialist world. Lights flickered off untouched and radios turned themselves on. Telephones rang in the dead of the night and breathed wordlessly in his ear. Six weeks ago, flying from New York City, Bech had expected Moscow to be a blazing counterpart and instead saw, through the plane window, a skein of hoarded lights no brighter, on that vast black plain, than a girl’s body in a dark room.

Past the talking tree stood the American legation. The sidewalk, heaped with broken glass, was roped off, so that pedestrians had to detour into the gutter. Bech detached himself from the stream, crossed the little barren of pavement, smiled at the Bulgarian militiamen who were sullenly guarding the jewel-bright heaps of shards, and pulled open the bronze door. The cultural officer was crisper after a normal night’s sleep. He clenched his pipe in his teeth and handed Bech a small list. “You’re to meet with the Writers’ Union at eleven. These are writers you might ask to see. As far as we can tell, they’re among the more progressive.”

Words like “progressive” and “liberal” had a somewhat reversed sense in this world. At times, indeed, Bech felt he had passed through a mirror, a dingy flecked mirror that reflected feebly the capitalist world; in its dim depths everything was similar but left-handed. One of the names ended in “-ova.” Bech said, “A woman.”

“A poetess,” the cultural officer said, sucking and tamping in a fury of bogus efficiency. “Very popular, apparently. Her books are impossible to buy.”

“Have you read anything by these people?”

“I’ll be frank with you. I can just about make my way through a newspaper.”

“But you always know what a newspaper will say anyway.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t get your meaning.”

“There isn’t any.” Bech didn’t quite know why the Americans he met here behind the mirror irritated him—whether because they garishly refused to blend into this shadow-world or because they were always so solemnly sending him on ridiculous errands.

At the Writers’ Union, he handed the secretary the list as it had been handed to him, on U.S. legation stationery. The secretary, a large stooped man with the hands of a stonemason, grimaced and shook his head but obligingly reached for the telephone. Bech’s meeting was already waiting in another room. It was the usual one, the one that, with small differences, he had already attended in Moscow and Kiev, Yerevan and Alma-Ata, Bucharest and Prague: the polished oval table, the bowl of fruit, the morning light, the gleaming glasses of brandy and mineral water, the lurking portrait of Lenin, the six or eight patiently sitting men who would leap to their feet with quick blank smiles. These men would include a few literary officials, termed “critics,” high in the Party, loquacious and witty and destined to propose a toast to international understanding; a few selected novelists and poets, mustachioed, smoking, sulking at this invasion of their time; a university professor, the head of the Anglo-American Literature department, speaking in a beautiful withered English of Mark Twain and Sinclair Lewis; a young interpreter with a moist handshake; a shaggy old journalist obsequiously scribbling notes; and, on the rim of the group, in chairs placed to suggest that they had invited themselves, one or two gentlemen of ill-defined status, fidgety and tieless, maverick translators who would turn out to be the only ones present who had ever read a word by Henry Bech.

Here this type was represented by a stout man in a tweed coat leather-patched at the elbows in the British style. The whites of his eyes were distinctly red. He shook Bech’s hand eagerly, made of it almost an embrace of reunion, bending his face so close that Bech could distinguish the smells of tobacco, garlic, cheese, and alcohol. Even as they were seating themselves around the table, and the Writers’ Union chairman, a man elegantly bald, with very pale eyelashes, was touching his brandy glass as if to lift it, this anxious red-eyed interloper blurted at Bech, “Your *Travel Light* was so marvellous a book. The motels, the highways, the young girls with their lovers who were motorcyclists, so marvellous, so American, the youth, the adoration for space and speed, the barbarity of the advertisements in neon lighting, the very poetry. It takes us truly into another dimension.”

*Travel Light* was the first novel, the famous one. Bech disliked discussing it. “At home,” he said, “it was criticized as despairing.”

The man’s hands, stained orange with tobacco, lifted in amazement and plopped noisily to his knees. “No, no a thousand times. Truth, wonder, terror even, vulgarity, yes. But despair, no, not at all, not one iota. Your critics are dead wrong.”

“Thank you.”

The chairman softly cleared his throat and lifted his glass an inch from the table, so that it formed with its reflection a kind of playing card.

Bech’s admirer excitedly persisted. “You are not a *wet* writer, no. You are a dry writer, yes? You have the expressions, am I wrong in English, dry, hard?”

“More or less.”

“I want to translate you!”

It was the agonized cry of a condemned man, for the chairman coldly lifted his glass to the height of his eyes, and like a firing squad the others followed suit. Blinking his white lashes, the chairman gazed mistily in the direction of the sudden silence, and spoke in Bulgarian.

The young interpreter murmured in Bech’s ear. “I wish to propose now, ah, a very brief toast. I know it will seem doubly brief to our honored American guest, who has so recently enjoyed the, ah, hospitality of our Soviet comrades.” There must have been a joke here, for the rest of the table laughed. “But in seriousness permit me to say that in our country we have seen in years past too few Americans, ah, of Mr. Bech’s progressive and sympathetic stripe. We hope in the next hour to learn from him much that is interesting and, ah, socially useful about the literature of his large country, and perhaps we may in turn inform him of our own proud literature, of which perhaps he knows regrettably little. Ah, so let me finally, then, since there is a saying that too long a courtship spoils the marriage, offer to drink, in our native plum brandy *slivovica*, ah, firstly to the success of his visit and, in the second place, to the mutual increase of international understanding.”

“Thank you,” Bech said and, as a courtesy, drained his glass. It was wrong; the others, having merely sipped, stared. The purple burning revolved in Bech’s stomach, and a severe distaste—for himself, for his role, for this entire artificial and futile process—lighted upon a small brown spot on a pear in the bowl so shiningly posed before his eyes.

The red-eyed fool smelling of cheese was ornamenting the toast. “It is a personal honor for me to meet the man who, in *Travel Light*, truly added a new dimension to American prose.”

“The book was written,” Bech said, “ten years ago.”

“And since?” A slumping, mustached man sat up and sprang into English. “Since, you have written what?”

Bech had been asked that question often in these weeks and his answer had grown curt. “A second novel called *Brother Pig*, which is St. Bernard’s expression for the body.”

“Good. Yes, and?”

“A collection of essays and sketches called *When the Saints*.”

“I like the title less well.”

“It’s the beginning of a famous Negro song.”

“We know the song,” another man said, a smaller man, with the tense, dented mouth of a hare. He lightly sang, “Lordy, I just want to be in that number.”

“And the last book,” Bech said, “was a long novel called *The Chosen* that took five years to write and that nobody liked.”

“I have read reviews,” the red-eyed man said. “I have not read the book. Copies are difficult here.”

“I’ll give you one,” Bech said.

The promise seemed, somehow, to make the recipient unfortunately conspicuous; wringing his stained hands, he appeared to swell in size, to intrude grotesquely upon the inner ring, so that the interpreter took it upon himself to whisper, with the haste of an apology, into Bech’s ear, “This gentleman is well known as the translator into our language of *Alice in Wonderland*.”

“A marvellous book,” the translator said, deflating in relief, pulling at his pockets for a cigarette. “It truly takes us into another dimension. Something that must be done. We live in a new cosmos.”

The chairman spoke in Bulgarian, musically, at length. There was polite laughter. Nobody translated for Bech. The professorial type, his black hair as rigid as a toupee, jerked forward. “Tell me, is it true, as I have read”—his phrases whistled slightly, like rusty machinery—“that the stock of Sinclair Lewis has plummeted under the Salinger wave?”

And so it went, here as in Kiev, Prague, and Alma-Ata, the same questions, more or less predictable, and his own answers, terribly familiar to him by now, mechanical, stale, irrelevant, untrue, claustrophobic. Then the door opened. In came, with the rosy air of a woman fresh from a bath, a little breathless, having hurried, hatless, a woman in a blond coat, her hair also blond. The secretary, entering behind her, seemed to make a cherishing space around her with his large curved hands. He introduced her to Bech as Vera Something-ova, the poetess he had asked to meet. None of the others on the list, he explained, answered their telephones.

“Aren’t you kind to come?” As Bech asked it, it was a genuine question, to which he expected some sort of an answer.

She spoke to the interpreter in Bulgarian. “She says,” the interpreter told Bech, “she is sorry she is so late.”

“But she was just called!” In the warmth of his confusion and pleasure Bech turned to speak directly to her, forgetting he would not be understood. “I’m terribly sorry to have interrupted your morning.”

“I am pleased,” she said, “to meet you. I heard of you spoken in France.”

“You speak English!”

“No. Very little amount.”

“But you *do*.”

A chair was brought for her from a corner of the room. She yielded her coat, revealing herself in a suit also blond, as if her clothes were an aspect of a total consistency. She sat down opposite Bech, crossing her legs. Her legs were visibly good; her face was perceptibly broad. Lowering her lids, she tugged her skirt to the curve of her knee. It was his sense of her having hurried, hurried to him, and of being, still, graciously flustered, that most touched him.

He spoke to her very clearly, across the fruit, fearful of abusing and breaking the fragile bridge of her English. “You are a poetess. When I was young, I also wrote poems.”

She was silent so long he thought she would never answer; but then she smiled and pronounced, “You are not old now.”

“Your poems. Are they difficult?”

“They are difficult—to write.”

“But not to read?”

“I think—not so very.”

“Good. Good.”

Despite the decay of his career, Bech had retained an absolute faith in his instincts; he never doubted that somewhere an ideal course was open to him and that his intuitions were pre-dealt clues to his destiny. He had loved, briefly or long, with or without consummation, perhaps a dozen women; yet all of them, he now saw, shared the trait of approximation, of narrowly missing an undisclosed prototype. The surprise he felt did not have to do with the appearance, at last, of this central woman; he had always expected her to appear. What he had not expected was her appearance here, in this remote and bullied nation, in this room of morning light, where he discovered a small knife in his fingers and on the table before him, golden and moist, a precisely divided pear.

Men travelling alone develop a romantic vertigo. Bech had already fallen in love with a freckled embassy wife in Prague, a buck-toothed chanteuse in Romania, a stolid Mongolian sculptress in Kazakhstan. In the Tretyakov Gallery he had fallen in love with a recumbent statue, and at the Moscow Ballet School with an entire roomful of girls. Entering the room, he had been struck by the aroma, tenderly acrid, of young female sweat. Sixteen and seventeen, wearing patchy practice suits, the girls were twirling so strenuously their slippers were unravelling. Demure student faces crowned the unconscious insolence of their bodies. The room was doubled in depth by a floor-to-ceiling mirror. Bech was seated on a bench at its base. Staring above his head, each girl watched herself with frowning eyes frozen, for an instant in the turn, by the imperious delay and snap of her head. Bech tried to remember the lines of Rilke that expressed it, this snap and delay: *did not the drawing remain / that the dark stroke of your eyebrow / swiftly wrote on the wall of its own turning?* At one point the teacher, a shapeless old Ukrainian lady with gold canines, a *prima* of the Thirties, had arisen and cried something translated to Bech as, “No, no, the arms free, free!” And in demonstration she had executed a rapid series of pirouettes with such proud effortlessness that all the girls, standing this way and that like deer along the wall, had applauded. Bech had loved them for that. In all his loves, there was an urge to rescue—to rescue the girls from the slavery of their exertions, the statue from the cold grip of its own marble, the embassy wife from her boring and unctuous husband, the chanteuse from her nightly humiliation (she could not sing), the Mongolian from her stolid race. But the Bulgarian poetess presented herself to him as needing nothing, as being complete, poised, satisfied, achieved. He was aroused and curious and, the next day, inquired about her of the man with the vaguely contemptuous mouth of a hare—a novelist turned playwright and scenarist, who accompanied him to the Rila Monastery. “She lives to write,” the playwright said. “I do not think it is healthy.”

Bech said, “But she seems so healthy.” They stood beside a small church with whitewashed walls. From the outside it looked like a hovel, a shelter for pigs or chickens. For five centuries the Turks had ruled Bulgaria, and the Christian churches, however richly adorned within, had humble exteriors. A peasant woman with wildly snarled hair unlocked the door for them. Though the church could hardly ever have held more than fifty worshippers, it was divided into three parts, and every inch of wall was covered with eighteenth-century frescoes. Those in the narthex depicted a Hell where the devils wielded scimitars. Passing through the tiny nave, Bech peeked through the iconostasis into the screened area that, in the symbolism of Orthodox architecture, represented the next, the hidden world—Paradise. He glimpsed a row of books, an easy chair, a pair of ancient oval spectacles. Outdoors again, he felt released from the unpleasantly tight atmosphere of a children’s book. They were on the side of a hill. Above them was a stand of pines whose trunks wore shells of ice. Below them sprawled the monastery, a citadel of Bulgarian national feeling during the years of the Turkish Yoke. The last monks had been moved out in 1961. An aimless soft rain was falling in these mountains, and there were not many German tourists today. Across the valley, whose little silver river still turned a water wheel, a motionless white horse stood silhouetted against a green meadow, pinned there like a brooch.

“I am an old friend of hers,” the playwright said. “I worry about her.”

“Are the poems good?”

“It is difficult for me to judge. They are very feminine. Perhaps shallow.”

“Shallowness can be a kind of honesty.”

“Yes. She is very honest in her work.”

“And in her life?”

“As well.”

“What does her husband do?”

The other man looked at him with parted lips and touched his arm, a strange Slavic gesture, communicating an underlying racial urgency, that Bech no longer shied from. “But she has no husband. As I say, she is too much for poetry to have married.”

“But her name ends in ‘-ova.’ ”

“I see. You are mistaken. It is not a matter of marriage; I am Petrov, my unmarried sister is Petrova. All females.”

“How stupid of me. But I think it’s such a pity, she’s so charming.”

“In America, only the uncharming fail to marry?”

“Yes, you must be very uncharming not to marry.”

“It is not so here. The government indeed is alarmed; our birthrate is one of the lowest in Europe. It is a problem for economists.”

Bech gestured at the monastery. “Too many monks?”

“Not enough, perhaps. With too few of monks, something of the monk enters everybody.”

The peasant woman, who seemed old to Bech but who was probably younger than he, saw them to the edge of her domain. She huskily chattered in what Petrov said was very amusing rural slang. Behind her, now hiding in her skirts and now darting away, was her child, a boy not more than three. He was faithfully chased, back and forth, by a small white pig, who moved, as pigs do, on tiptoe, with remarkably abrupt changes of direction. Something in the scene, in the open glee of the woman’s parting smile and the untamed way her hair thrust out from her head, something in the mountain mist and spongy rutted turf into which frost had begun to break at night, evoked for Bech a nameless absence to which was attached, like a horse to a meadow, the image of the poetess, with her broad face, her good legs, her Parisian clothes, and her sleekly brushed hair. Petrov, in whom he was beginning to sense, through the wraps of foreignness, a clever and kindred mind, seemed to have overheard his thoughts, for he said, “If you would like, we could have dinner. It would be easy for me to arrange.”

“With her?”

“Yes, she is my friend, she would be glad.”

“But I have nothing to say to her. I’m just curious about such an intense conjunction of good looks and brains. I mean, what does a soul do with it all?”

“You may ask her. Tomorrow night?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t. I’m scheduled to go to the ballet, and the next night the legation is giving a cocktail party for me, and then I fly home.”

“Home? So soon?”

“It does not feel soon to me. I must try to work again.”

“A drink, then. Tomorrow evening before the ballet? It is possible? It is not possible.”

Petrov looked puzzled, and Bech realized that it was his fault, for he was nodding to say Yes, but in Bulgaria nodding meant No, and a shake of the head meant Yes. “Yes,” he said. “Gladly.”

The ballet was entitled *Silver Slippers*. As Bech watched it, the word “ethnic” kept coming to his mind. He had grown accustomed, during his trip, to this sort of artistic evasion, the retreat from the difficult and disappointing present into folk dance, folk tale, folk song, with always the implication that, beneath the embroidered peasant costume, the folk was really one’s heart’s own darling, the proletariat.

“Do you like fairy tales?” It was the moist-palmed interpreter who accompanied him to the theatre.

“I *love* them,” Bech said, with a fervor and gaiety lingering from the previous hour. The interpreter looked at him anxiously, as when Bech had swallowed the brandy in one swig, and throughout the ballet kept murmuring explanations of self-evident events on the stage. Each night, a princess would put on silver slippers and dance through her mirror to tryst with a wizard, who possessed a magic stick that she coveted, for with it the world could be ruled. The wizard, as a dancer, was inept, and once almost dropped her, so that anger flashed from her eyes. She was, the princess, a little redhead with a high round bottom and a frozen pout and beautiful free arm motions, and Bech found it oddly ecstatic when, preparatory to her leap, she could dance toward the mirror, an empty oval, and another girl, identically dressed in pink, would emerge from the wings and perform as her reflection. And when the princess, haughtily adjusting her cape of invisibility, leaped through the oval of gold wire, Bech’s heart leaped backward into the enchanted hour he had spent with the poetess.

Though the appointment had been established, she came into the restaurant as if, again, she had been suddenly summoned and had hurried. She sat down between Bech and Petrov slightly breathless and fussed, but exuding, again, that impalpable warmth of intelligence and virtue.

“Vera, Vera,” Petrov said.

“You hurry too much,” Bech told her.

“Not so very much,” she said.

Petrov ordered her a cognac and continued with Bech their discussion of the newer French novelists. “It is tricks,” Petrov said. “Good tricks, but tricks. It does not have enough to do with life, it is too much verbal nervousness. Is that sense?”

“It’s an epigram,” Bech said.

“There are just two of their number with whom I do not feel this: Claude Simon and Samuel Beckett. You have no relation, Bech, Beckett?”

“None.”

Vera said, “Nathalie Sarraute is a very modest woman. She felt motherly to me.”

“You have met her?”

“In Paris I heard her speak. Afterward there was the coffee. I liked her theories, of the, oh, *what*? Of the *little* movements within the heart.” She delicately measured a pinch of space and smiled, through Bech, back at herself.

“Tricks,” Petrov said. “I do not feel this with Beckett; there, in a low form, believe it or not, one has human content.”

Bech felt duty-bound to pursue this, to ask about the theatre of the absurd in Bulgaria, about abstract painting. These were the touchstones of American-style progressiveness; Russia had none, Romania some, Czechoslovakia plenty. Instead, he asked the poetess, “Motherly?”

Vera explained, her hands delicately modelling the air, rounding into nuance, as it were, the square corners of her words. “After her talk, we—talked.”

“In French?”

“And in Russian.”

“She knows Russian?”

“She was born Russian.”

“How is her Russian?”

“Very pure but—old-fashioned. Like a book. As she talked, I felt in a book, safe.”

“You do not always feel safe?”

“Not always.”

“Do you find it difficult to be a woman poet?”

“We have a tradition of woman poets. We have Elisaveta Bagriyana, who is very great.”

Petrov leaned toward Bech as if to nibble him. “Your own works? Are they influenced by the *nouvelle vague*? Do you consider yourself to write anti-*romans*?”

Bech kept himself turned toward the woman. “Do you want to hear about how I write? You don’t, do you?”

“Very much yes,” she said.

He told them, told them shamelessly, in a voice that surprised him with its steadiness, its limpid urgency, how once he had written, how in *Travel Light* he had sought to show people skimming the surface of things with their lives, taking tints from things the way that objects in a still life color one another, and how later he had attempted to place beneath the melody of plot a countermelody of imagery, interlocking images which had risen to the top and drowned his story, and how in *The Chosen* he had sought to make of this confusion the theme itself, an epic theme, by showing a population of characters whose actions were all determined, at the deepest level, by nostalgia, by a desire to get back, to dive, each, into the springs of their private imagery. The book probably failed; at least, it was badly received. Bech apologized for telling all this. His voice tasted flat in his mouth; he felt a secret intoxication and a secret guilt, for he had contrived to give a grand air, as of an impossibly noble and quixotically complex experiment, to his failure, when at bottom, he suspected, a certain simple laziness was the cause.

Petrov said, “Fiction so formally sentimental could not be composed in Bulgaria. We do not have a happy history.”

It was the first time Petrov had sounded like a Communist. If there was one thing that irked Bech about these people behind the mirror, it was their assumption that, however second-rate elsewhere, in suffering they were supreme. He said, “Believe it or not, neither do we.”

Vera calmly intruded. “Your personae are not moved by love?”

“Yes, very much. But as a form of nostalgia. We fall in love, I tried to say in the book, with women who remind us of our first landscape. A silly idea. I used to be interested in love. I once wrote an essay on the orgasm—you know the word?—”

She shook her head. He remembered that it meant Yes.

“—on the orgasm as perfect memory. The one mystery is, what are we remembering?”

She shook her head again, and he noticed that her eyes were gray, and that in their depths his image (which he could not see) was searching for the thing remembered. She composed her fingertips around the brandy glass and said, “There is a French poet, a young one, who has written of this. He says that never else do we, do we so gather up, collect into ourselves, oh—” Vexed, she spoke to Petrov in rapid Bulgarian.

He shrugged and said, “Concentrate our attention.”

“—concentrate our attention,” she repeated to Bech, as if the words, to be believed, had to come from her. “I say it foolish—foolishly—but in French it is very well put and—*correct*.”

Petrov smiled neatly and said, “This is an enjoyable subject for discussion, love.”

“It remains,” Bech said, picking his words as if the language were not native even to him, “one of the few things that still warrant meditation.”

“I think it is good,” she said.

“Love?” he asked, startled.

She shook her head and tapped the stem of her glass with a fingernail, so that Bech had an inaudible sense of ringing, and she bent as if to study the liquor, so that her entire body borrowed a rosiness from the brandy and burned itself into Bech’s memory—the silver gloss of her nail, the sheen of her hair, the symmetry of her arms relaxed on the white tablecloth, everything except the expression on her face.

Petrov asked aloud Bech’s opinion of Dürrenmatt.

Actuality is a running impoverishment of possibility. Though he had looked forward to seeing her again at the legation cocktail party and had made sure that she was invited, when it occurred, though she came, he could not get to her. He saw her enter, with Petrov, but he was fenced in by an attaché of the Yugoslav Embassy and his burnished Tunisian wife; and, later, when he was worming his way toward her diagonally, a steely hand closed on his arm and a rasping American female told him that her fifteen-year-old nephew had decided to be a writer and desperately needed advice. Not the standard crap, but real brass-knuckles advice. Bech found himself balked. He was surrounded by America: the voices, the narrow suits, the watery drinks, the clatter, the glitter. The mirror had gone opaque and gave him back only himself. He managed, in the end, as the officials were thinning out, to break through and confront her in a corner. Her coat, blond, with a rabbit collar, was already on; from its side pocket she pulled a pale volume of poems in the Cyrillic alphabet. “Please,” she said. On the flyleaf she had written, “to H. Beck, sincerelly, with bad spellings but much”—the last word looked like “leave” but must have been “love.”

“Wait,” he begged, and went back to where his ravaged pile of presentation books had been and, unable to find the one he wanted, stole the legation library’s jacketless copy of *The Chosen*. Placing it in her expectant hands, he told her, “Don’t look,” for inside he had written, with a drunk’s stylistic confidence,

Dear Vera Glavanakova—

It is a matter of earnest regret for me that you and I must live on opposite sides of the world.