

## BOOKS

FICTION CHRONICLE: SAM SACKS

## Coming Home to Roost



**MIROSLAV** Penkov's debut novel, **"Stork Mountain"** (FSG, 436 pages, \$26), is set in a village in the Strandja Mountains

on the Bulgarian border with Turkey, an age-old stork breeding site and for centuries a point of collision between East and West. It's rich earth for the novelist.

It begins when the narrator, a young Bulgarian immigrant, returns from America to visit his grandfather. He hopes to sell some family land to help pay his student debts, but falls in love with Elif, the rebellious daughter of the village imam. This is inauspicious, since the imam bears his grandfather an ancient grudge. Worse, Elif's sister is ill with St. Kosta's fever, a local malady (or as some think, a psychosomatic delusion) that drives women mad and can only be cured by dancing over burning coals.

In a way reminiscent of Téa Obreht's *"The Tiger's Wife,"* Mr. Penkov seeds his story with folklore from the ancient Thracians through the Communist era, many involving the superstitious rituals surrounding St. Kosta's fever. But the book's main attractions are the narrator's two confidants. Elif is fatalistic, sharp-tongued and desperate to escape her narrow destiny in the village ("That was the first time I ran away from home," she relates. "Metallica in Plovdiv. June 11, 1999.") The grandfa-

ther, a foxy old raconteur, is a fading repository of village traditions: "An old man's mind is a mountain, each memory a milk-washed bell. It's true, God holds the future, which is uncertain and unknown, so let him hold it. But the old man holds the past. The past is certain."

Mr. Penkov is an eager, inviting writer. But he's so bursting with tales that he can't stop, and the weakness of *"Stork Mountain"* is its overly extended conclusion. That finale, when it comes, is born of another collision,

An age-old stork breeding site in Turkey is a collision point between East and West.

as the ghosts of the past invade the present and drive the characters toward a dance with fire.

No border is more haunting or uncertain than old age, the subject of Arlene Heyman's terrific story collection **"Scary Old Sex"** (Bloomsbury, 228 pages, \$26). Mortality makes many unceremonious appearances here. In "Night Call," a son collects his father's dead body from the bed of his mistress. In "In the Happy Isles," a daughter contemplates the impending death of her addled mother: "For a moment she feels pro-

found grief, and then she is aware of a wish to get it over with, to get Gusie into the ground."

But as the title suggests, many of these stories concern what goes on between the sheets of sex- and sep-

thins out, underarm and pubic, as if the soil had changed to one that no longer supports that verdant shrubbery, but instead nourishes an astonishing variety of wild mushrooms—beautiful, if you have an eye."

"Scary Old Sex" is a debut for Ms. Heyman, a practicing psychiatrist. She was Bernard Malamud's lover in 1961, and she writes of a similar affair here. Yet "In Love With Murray," about an art student's relationship with a middle-aged married painter, is no salacious tell-all but rather a tender, perceptive work. Ms. Heyman sensitively explores all the angles of the impossible pairing, in which Murray plays the incompatible roles of lover, mentor and doting father figure. Their break-up is inevitable but genuinely affecting. They are one of the few couples in this striking collection who don't get to face the fears of old age together.

Two genres co-exist uncomfortably in Jung Yun's novel **"Shelter"** (Picador, 328 pages, \$26), which begins

with a burglary and rape in a Korean-American couple's Massachusetts household. This sounds like the jumping-off point for a crime procedural, but Ms. Yun focuses her story on the couple's son Kyung, a university professor struggling to sustain his marriage and stay afloat financially: "Other than his debts, he wonders what, if anything, he'll have in his own name to leave behind."

Kyung was mistreated as a child, and although he invites his parents into his house, his festering resentment toward them makes him staggeringly unsympathetic to their ordeal. He broods endlessly over his childhood, his status as an outsider in a largely white neighborhood, his marital spats and his economic misfortunes. All these things are staple preoccupations of literary fiction, but they seem grotesquely insignificant in light of the horrific crime that opens the book.

The combination of grisly James Patterson thriller and melancholic suburban drama shouldn't work at all. Yet Ms. Yun pulls it off. Kyung is petulant and unlikeable, but he's also psychologically unstable. The proximity of his parents and the atmosphere of grief and panic launch him on a spiral of self-destruction that's impossible to turn away from. The novel grows darker and darker, until all its internal contradictions are eclipsed by an ending as disturbing and bereft as anything you'll read this year.



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