

# AND THAT WHICH PEOPLE ARE THINKING

VASYL GABOR

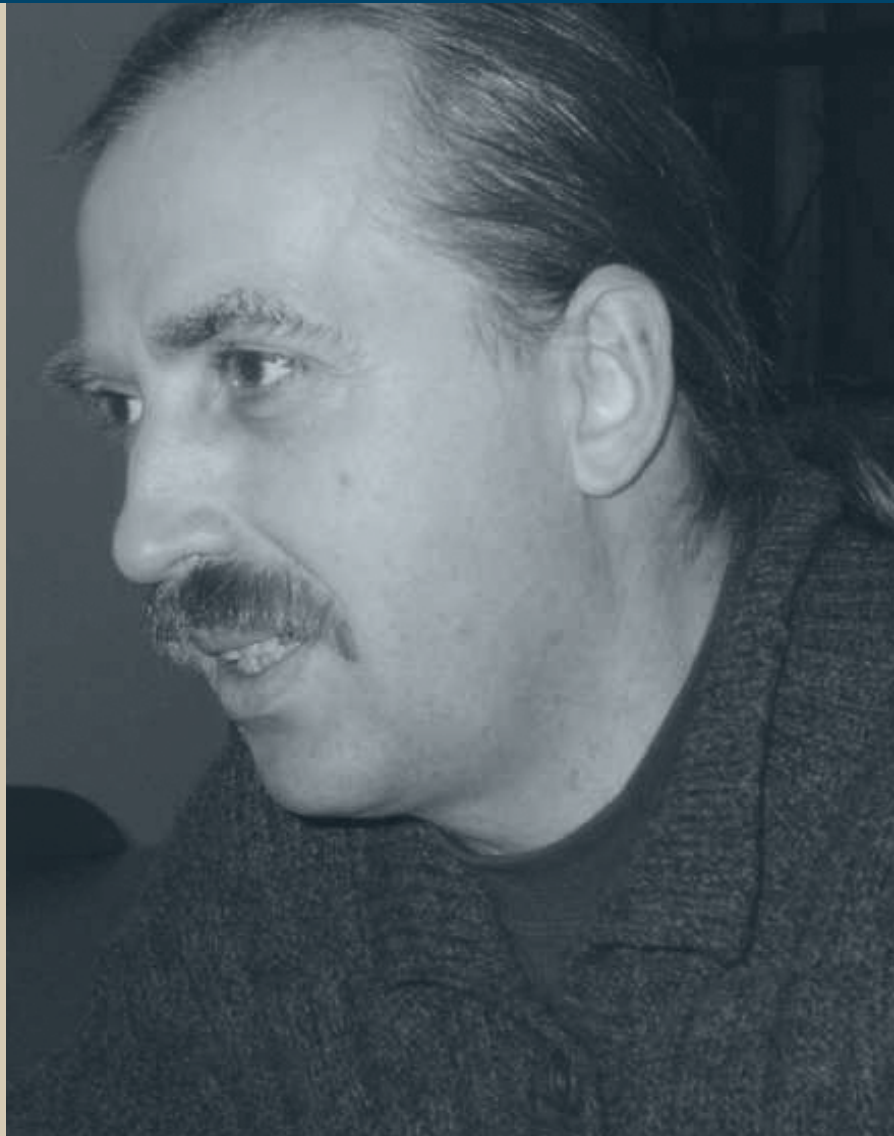
## CONTEMPORARY UKRAINIAN LITERATURE SERIES

Cosponsored by  
the Kennan Institute and the  
Ukrainian Studies Program  
at the Harriman Institute of  
Columbia University

---

*OCTOBER 29, 2012*  
HARRIMAN ATRIUM

*NOVEMBER 1, 2012*  
WOODROW WILSON  
INTERNATIONAL CENTER  
FOR SCHOLARS



Woodrow Wilson  
International  
Center  
for Scholars



The Harriman Institute  
at Columbia University

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vasyl Gabor, who lives in Lviv, was born in the region known as the Silver Land. He is well known in Ukraine as an original short story writer and compiler of the widely known anthologies *A Private Collection: Selected Ukrainian Prose and Essays of the End of the 20th Century*, 2002; *The Unknown Woman: an Anthology of Ukrainian 'Female' Prose and Essays of the 2nd Half of the 20th and the Beginning of the 21st Century*, 2005; *The Twelve. The Youngest Lviv Literary Bohemia of the 1930s: an Anthology of Urban Prose*, 2006; *Bu-Ba-Bu: Selected Works*, 2007; *Ukrainian Literary Schools and Groups of the 1960-90s: Poetry and Essays*, 2009 and others, issued under the auspices of the Private Collection modern literature publishing project by Pyramid Literary Agency, Lviv.

Vasyl Gabor was born on 10th December 1959 in Transcarpathia, in the village of Oleksandrivka (previously Shandrovo), Khust Region. In 1986 he graduated from the Faculty of Journalism at Ivan Franko State (now National) University, Lviv. He worked for Lviv newspapers and a local history journal *Litopys Chervonoyi Kalyny* (Red Arrow Wood Chronicles). Vasyl Gabor is currently Head of the Foreign Periodicals Research Department at the Scientific Periodicals Research Centre of the Lviv Vasyl Stefanyk National Scientific Library. In 1997 Vasyl Gabor defended his PhD thesis. He has been a member of the Ukrainian Writers' Association since 1997. He was awarded the Kurylas Family Prize (1994) and the Lesya and Petro Kovalev Literary Prize (2006).

Vasyl Gabor is the author of a collection of short stories entitled *A Book of Exotic Dreams and Real Events*, 1999; 2nd ed. 2003, 3rd ed. 2009, and a collection of writings entitled *And that which People are Thinking*, 2012.

He is one of the authors of the book *Four at the Table: Anthology of Four Friends*, 2004, the author of essays and literary investigations *From Joyce to Chubay*, 2010; a historical and bibliographical research *Ukrainian Periodicals in Uzhhorod (1867 – 1944)*, 2003; a brief summary of the life and the work of Ivan Kolos *Ivan Kolos — Poet of Carpathian Ukraine*, 2010 and a local history essay entitled *My Shandrovo*, 2003; in 2000 he re-issued the previously self-published literary journal *Skrynya*, 1971. He has also compiled the biographical and bibliographic reference *Dariya Vikons'ka (1893 1945)*, 2007.

Some short stories by Vasyl Gabor have been translated into English, German, Serbian, Slovak, Croatian, Czech, Japanese and Bulgarian.

## THE HIGH WATER

And it was here, in this very place, in these mountains reaching up to the skies, that I began to be pursued by the high water. I could hear it getting closer. If I closed my eyes for an instant, I could see a colossal wall of muddy water overwhelming me and engulfing the mountains at incredible speed. I saw the massive volume of water destroying everything in its path, spinning around in a wild maelstrom uprooted trees, roofs torn from buildings, and all manner of household implements, livestock, and domestic animals—cows, pigs, chickens, dogs, and cats. Amidst all this, human beings, dead and alive, were also being whirled round. The living desperately clutched at the branches of trees, planks of wood, and logs that were floating in the water, in an instinctive attempt to save themselves and their dear ones. But could anyone survive under the pressure of such deep water? The roar of the water grew louder and louder; it sounded as though some gigantic wounded beast was approaching. I could even hear the cold breathing of the watery beast, and then I quickly opened my eyes to see my last moments. Suddenly the vision disappeared, and peace and quiet reigned all around. From time to time it was interrupted by the deep buzz of a bumble-bee or the pleasant hum of a honey-bee. The blue mountains could be seen in the distance, and above them an eagle was circling, a tiny dot scarcely perceptible against the clear sky. Only the birds will survive the high water, I thought. But who knows whether they will be able to remain airborne for such a long time. As their wings become stiff with exhaustion, the birds will plunge like stones into the water's bottomless depths. For there is no escape from the high water.

I try to fathom what it is that is disturbing me, why I began to have this vision of water, purifying water, water that brings people into the world and carries them away. Can it be that the very water that created the world will also cause it to perish? Terrified, I close my eyes and again I see the gigantic wave, like a wide wall many kilometres high. Roaring, it is rushing towards the mountains, and I think of my parents, my brother and his family, I think of my wife and our children, all of whom I left behind in the valley. I run after them. I arrive, quite out of breath. And they are all very peacefully sitting around in the dining room, calm as you like, chatting away happily while sitting at the table and enjoying their food and drink. I call out to them that the high water is coming, but they look at me in surprise, almost as though there were something wrong with me.

I see only the fear in my wife's eyes—not for herself, but for our children. I ask my father and brother to bind together with wire and chains the planks that have been lying in two piles in the garden, drying in the sun, for years now. My brother gives my father a quizzical look, but the latter gives him a nod, indicating that he should do as I ask. We only just manage to tie together the two piles of planks and get on the raft, taking with us a little bread and two axes, when we hear the frightful roar of the high water. Nobody had seen anything like it before. People began to rush about crazily, hurrying to untie the cattle and bring in or out some valuables, while others do the opposite, shutting themselves indoors.

Father tied us all to one rope and then to the raft, and just then we caught sight of the gigantic wave, so high it half blotted out the sky. Nothing will be left of us when that wall of water falls on

## AND THAT WHICH PEOPLE ARE THINKING

us, I thought involuntarily. Amazingly, the water engulfs us and then lifts us, raft and all, and in a crazy maelstrom throws us up to the surface. And we all survive, though we are swamped by filthy, salty water. Oh God! All sorts of stuff is floating about—so much of it! In the whirling maelstrom we see people and terrified cattle, but we can't hear either human voices or the bellowing of the beasts above the water's roar. We push away the tree trunks and drive away the frightened livestock from our raft, to prevent them from capsizing it. Under the weight of our bodies the raft is already sitting quite low in the water, and the waves submerge it time and again, so if it were not for the fact that we are tied to it, we would be swept away into the inky black depths.

Survivors spotting our raft began to swim toward it from all directions, their eyes blazing maniacally. To them our raft was the last hope of salvation. We realised that if they climbed aboard we would all perish, because the raft would either capsize or sink. We exchanged glances among ourselves. We all knew that if we wanted to survive we would have to repel the people from our raft—our neighbours, our kin, and our best friends. We would even need to use the axes, because the poles would not be enough—the people we drove off would keep trying to clamber onto the raft again and again. We knew that once we raised the axes against someone, we would become murderers. Was it worth surviving, in that case? And then, even if we managed to survive, I thought, wouldn't we be merely prolonging the agony of dying? After all, our bread would run out and we would be left alone in the middle of the sea created by the filthy, salty high water. What would our fate be then?

The shouting of the people got louder, and dripping wet hands grasped at our raft as the first people began to clamber onto it.

"Push them off! Push them off!" shouted our womenfolk inaudibly. "Save our children!"

The axes trembled in our hands.

"I can't do it!" shouts my brother. Like them, he is shouting too, but I can't hear his words.

"Neither can I!" says my father, shaking his head.

We drive the terrified people off with the poles; we are soaked in sweat and water, and they keep swimming towards the raft. Our arms are already becoming numb, and all our strength is deserting us.

"Oh God, if they get onto the raft we'll all perish," shout the women. We still can't hear their voices above the roar of the water, but we can read their words on their lips and in their eyes, full of despair and terror.

And we know it will be as our women say, since there are crazed looks in the eyes of the people who want to be saved, and wild, hoarse screams struggle to escape from their throats. All that is left of our former fellow villagers, our best friends and neighbors, is their human form. The high water has turned them into animals. But wait a moment, are we really any better? Perhaps we are the animals, because we are cruelly driving people away from our raft instead of offering them a

helping hand.

And then our father fell, and they started to drag him into the water. How fortunate that he was tied to us by the rope. We rush to his aid and strike at the arms of the attackers with the butts of the axes. We rescue our father, but he is hardly breathing. Blood is flowing from the scratches on his face. The women are crying.

"Leave our raft alone!" we keep shouting, but our attackers don't hear us and clamber up.

We know that our raft is an uncertain means of survival, yet it gives us at least some faint hope. But more and more people are trying to get aboard.

I can't watch this frightful vision any longer, and I open my eyes. The vision disappears, but I can still hear the roar of the rushing high water in the distance.

I can't understand why it is pursuing me. I try to think about something else, to get it out of my head, but it steals up on me like a gust of wind, making itself felt like a gentle breath of air, which is enough to strike fear into my very soul. It seems to me that I used to experience feelings like this when I was fifteen years old. For a long time then I kept having the same dream again and again. I dreamt that I was being led through a cemetery by someone who was very close to me and yet was a stranger, who was showing me the graves of my descendants. I see the names of members of my family carved on the headstones, with the dates of their birth and their death below: the year 6500, the year 6900. I was surprised and gratified to see how prolific our family turned out to be, but I was terribly afraid to look around, since I knew that my own grave was behind me. I was gripped by fear at the very thought that I would see the date of my own death on a headstone. At that point, I started to run. First I ran through the whole cemetery, then through the town. The town was large and empty, like the cemetery—its buildings and roads were black. Only when I collapsed, exhausted from running and not far from our house, did I see that the road and our building were different in colour. At this point I always woke up, with incredible relief and joy in my heart that I had not looked round and seen the year of my death on a gravestone.

Ah, I thought, so this dream was not pointless—it was a premonition of danger. In those days of my youth, that alien force could not get the better of me, and it left me in peace. But now it had returned and was trying to force the vision of the high water on me. Of course, I know very well that it can end only in death—but does anyone want to see their own demise, or that of other people?

True, initially the idea of committing suicide had come to my mind, so as to obliterate the vision of the high water absolutely. But, I thought, in that act I would discover only my own powerlessness and weakness, and in the end would not avert the coming of the high water. What disturbed me most was that by this act I would not only distress those dearest to me, but I would leave them to face the high water on their own. When it comes, I want to be by their side—and my sense that it is approaching is ever more keen. In despair I wipe my face and squint. Once more I see myself with my family and my brother with his family and our elderly parents on the raft, driven by the waves to the furthest edge of the wall of water that extends over many kilometres. It begins to

## AND THAT WHICH PEOPLE ARE THINKING

dawn on me that the high water is carrying with it all that is living and non-living on the earth, like a wheel destroying everything and crushing everything into a mire. Is it really our turn now to hurtle into the black abyss? No, no! I shake my head, banishing the vision as my heart starts to race and my hands tremble. Why should it be me that suffers all this? Why can't I get rid of these terrifying premonitions? And why did the vision of the high water start to appear here, of all places, in the mountains, which one would think cannot be threatened by any water? Are they the first to sense our demise, and are they already weeping over our final days?

Don't come, high water, I whisper faintly, and I find that I am ridiculous: for it is already on its way and nothing can stop it now...

*Translated by Patrick Corness with Natalia Pomirko and Oksana Bunio*

From **A Book of Exotic Dreams and Real Events** (Lviv: Publishing House 'Piramida', 2012)

## A STORY ABOUT ONE DOLLAR

This is a true, not a made-up, story. When I set off for America, my father, being completely convinced that America is a fantastically rich country with dollars lying around everywhere, even on the street, strongly advised me, although we laughed at him, to take a large shovel with me so that I could gather as much money as possible. Having arrived in a small, provincial town, I immediately wrote father to advise him not to be too upset that I hadn't taken a shovel with me because in America, money doesn't just lie around on the street. Moreover, I was indeed hoping to earn a little money but, because I didn't have official permission to work in America, no one would hire me; and it looked like I would return a half a year later, to everyone's chagrin, not with overfilled pockets but with empty ones.

But God took pity on me. In three months I obtained the right to work and, with fervent energy, I began making up for lost time. I took on two jobs, working all Saturdays and Sundays, often during the night shift, sometimes only sleeping a few hours a day; and the work was very intense and at a pace not unlike that with which I would disassemble and assemble an automatic rifle while in the army. But the earnings in that small town were meager, which discouraged me. I even ended up working on Easter Sunday (Gregorian calendar). And it was on that very day that something happened to me that affected me greatly and, as I can now say, changed me drastically. On that day I received a gift from God.

And this is what happened. When the amount of customers in the fast-food restaurant had died down, I took a seat by a wide window to drink a cup of hot coffee with milk. It was warm and quiet in the restaurant but it was windy outside. The wind loudly whistled by the window, swaying the tops of trees and whipping a path of random trash around the restaurant: newspaper shreds, crumpled plastic food wrappers, dried weeds. "Looks like I'll have to go out and sweep again", I thought unhappily and set off to the task; but then, suddenly, I saw that the wind was tossing directly at me, along the asphalt road and across the flowerbeds, a green banknote. It was difficult to make out what kind of bill it was but I immediately became happy that God had not forgotten about me, even though I was in distant America and had sent me a gift right on Eastern Sunday. It turned out to be only a dollar bill but this did not disappoint me in the least bit; conversely, it cheered me up. Because a thought instantly popped into my head that God, tired of hearing me pleading for help, sent me a dollar so that I could use it to buy a lottery ticket with which I would win the jackpot rendering me materially comfortable for the rest of my life. But then this thought made me laugh because God and money are discordant. More likely, God sent me a sign: He calmed me so that I wouldn't be so concerned with making money because money is just simple trash that gets blown along the street by the wind. And I did calm down and I don't even remember what I spent that dollar on – whether I spent it on a bus ride or whether I just added it to a larger sum when buying something at a store. But nonetheless, a devilish voice then said: "You should have bought a lottery ticket with that dollar because it certainly would have been a winner." I don't know, maybe I would have. But that's not the point; this found dollar taught me not to be overly concerned with money and not to tremble over every hard-earned penny. That is why, upon returning home, my

## AND THAT WHICH PEOPLE ARE THINKING

close friend and I had the guts to set off on a risky venture – we put up all of our hard-earned cash to publish the “A Private Collection” anthologies. We could not cover all the printing costs, we borrowed money to publish the book and our debt was so high that we basically would have had to sell both of our dwellings in order to just settle it. Today, it seems that our initiative really was insane but without it a whole series of books published in Lviv under the title “A Private Collection” would not exist. And all of this was influenced by one dollar.

I like to tell my friends this story and some of them think I am exaggerating a bit about the effect one dollar had on my life. But no, I counter, I am like my father, who likes to say that he only truly feels good when he is being thrifty, when he's sitting on a bit of money. And I now have an alternative: I can sit on a stack of published books....

*Translated by Mark Andryczyk*

From **Pro shcho Dumaie Liudyna...** (Lviv: Publishing House ‘Piramida’, 2012)



## FIVE SHORT STORIES FOR NATALIE

### THE FIFTH STORY — THE LAST ONE

#### THE LOVER

He too, the chairman of the council, the most respectable man in the village, was seduced by the charms of the young widow. After dark, when his exhausted wife and little children had fallen asleep (the two elder sons slept on straw in the barn), he quietly left by the front door and made his way across the gardens to The Hump, where the widow lived. He didn't want anybody to see him, so he crept along like a criminal, crouching in the bushes for a long time whenever he heard the slightest sound. It was a peculiar sensation for him to hear his heart pounding in his chest, perhaps from a fear of being found out, because he had never been afraid of anything in his life. His heart had pounded like that when he first saw the drop dead gorgeous young widow — it would have been a sin not to call on her, so he dared to do it. Not immediately, it's true. At first he spent a long time searching for a pretext. His preference would have been for the young widow to get into some kind of trouble — nothing serious mind — so the responsibility of sorting it out would fall to him. He would have gone to see her as a representative of the authorities and the widow would have been well disposed towards him; indeed she might even have taken a liking to him, which would have made life easier in a situation he found it difficult to handle. The thing is, he simply didn't know how to get into conversation with a strange woman and steer her, without being too blatant about it, in the direction he wanted. But the widow gave him no pretext and today he was going to see her with no particular idea in mind; he was just driven by sheer lust. Perhaps there was one thing that worried him; the chairman of the council usually goes to see people on official business in broad daylight, not at night when it's dark, and when he gets to the young widow's, what if one of her lovers is there? How should he react? Shout at her: "Why are you living in sin? Why are you breaking God's commandments?" And what if the young widow's lover asks him: "Well, what are you doing here at this time of night?" He had a response ready for such an eventuality: "I am the chairman of the council and the chairman of the council is supposed to see order is kept at night-time as well as during the day." But if he came across an argumentative lover who asked him: "Then why have you come on your own without witnesses as the chairman of the council ought to have done at this late hour?", he would reply: "Your wife asked me to catch you at it, you old layabout. Without making a big fuss though, because that would be embarrassing for her in front of people and in front of the children." To begin with, he was satisfied with his presence of mind, but when he considered how he should behave towards the young widow after that he became uneasy, his resolve weakened and his legs began to give way.

Perhaps he should give her a fright, saying he would tell the priest, who would condemn her dissolute behaviour from the pulpit and make her do penance. This would alarm the widow and on her knees she would start to beg him, the chairman of the council, not to do it and he would lift her up from the floor and begin to reassure her, stroking her curly tresses, her lovely face and her ample shoulders. At the prospect of feeling her firm breasts too his face flushed and he shook his

## AND THAT WHICH PEOPLE ARE THINKING

head, saying to himself: "Christ, Yura, how childish is that, you daft old goat. Just go home to your wife and pray; these are the temptations of the devil." But he did not have the strength to return; he was utterly feeble in the face of the force that was driving him towards the widow. He crept towards the darkened windows of the widow's house, imagining that inside, in the deserted house, on the bed — on those white sheets — a young woman was lying alone, unable to sleep without a man's caresses, and his desire to get into the house grew stronger. He began to scratch at the window with a finger-nail, whispering softly:

"Eufrusina, open the window for a moment."

But nobody came to the window, so he went to the door and began knocking gently, continuing to whisper Eufrusina's name. He recalled that when it was freezing cold his dog whined piteously, begging to be let indoors, just like this. This made him, the chairman of the council, the most respectable man in the village, uncomfortable in his indecision. So he went back to the window and knocked on it loudly. A light immediately flashed in the house, shining straight at him, the chairman of the council, causing him to recoil into the darkness of the night. He heard the young widow asking in an annoyed voice:

"Who's there?"

He quite forgot his momentary dissatisfaction with himself, trotting up to the window and whispering with delight:

"It's me, Eufrusina, the chairman of the council. Open the door."

"But what if someone is in the house and has heard everything, and spreads rumours all round the village?" — the thought suddenly crossed his mind and it was as though somebody had poured a bucket of cold water over him. But he immediately recovered and coolly, as though in somebody else's voice, shouted out:

"Open the door, Eufrusina. It's me, the chairman of the council. I've come to see you about a certain matter."

The young widow opened the door, carrying a gas lamp. She wore a linen blouse, revealing her full breasts; her full head of hair was let down, flowing as it was caught in the light and the chairman of the council found it arousing. The young widow looked relaxed and there was not the slightest sign of fear in her eyes. On the contrary, they radiated a happy playfulness and she had a smile on her lips.

He went indoors. When he saw her lover sitting at the table his jaw dropped in surprise and everything he had been ready to say to the illicit lover flew right out of his head, because it was his eldest son Mitro who was sitting at the table, no old layabout yet but just a lad with his mother's milk scarcely dry on his lips, looking at him quite unconcerned. It was actually the fact that his son was looking at him so calmly that took his breath away. He showed his son the door and he left unhurriedly, while the chairman of the council, shifting from one leg to the other, stayed on outside

the house for a while and then followed his son.

On the way home he considered that he ought to give his son a good hiding, because then it would mean that he had come for him in person, the chairman of the council and the father, and now the widow would realise why he had visited her so late at night. But perhaps it was better that she should know that.

In the morning he told his son:

"Mitro, if you walk over to see that widow, I'll break both your legs. Got it?"

"Yes, Dad," his son replied. Suddenly — and this was a considerable surprise to the chairman of the council — the son's eyes sparkled with amusement and the lad found it hard to avoid laughing out loud.

"Watch it! Don't you dare to laugh about it," said the chairman of the council severely.

The son kept his promise never to walk over to see the widow, but every night he was at her house.

When darkness fell, the young widow would come to the village from The Hump and carried Mitro home on her shoulders. Hiding in the orchard, the chairman of the council was surprised to see the widow carrying the boy. She followed the winding path, passed the well, went round the grove of hornbeam trees up to the old wild apple tree. Here she stopped for a moment to turn Mitro round and settle him better on her shoulders, then she climbed up to the cottage on The Hump. The chairman of the council watched all this spellbound. O Lord, how he wished he could carry the young widow off to her cottage like that, on his shoulders, but she had eyes only for his own lad. Sometimes he, as chairman of the council, considered going to the widow's and giving his son a good hiding, but at the thought of how cleverly he had fooled him and still managed to keep his word, an involuntarily smile would come to his lips. After all, this wasn't just anybody, it was his own flesh and blood, his son, who had got away with it so resourcefully. He heard the neighbours calling to one another in surprise:

"Look, look, Eufrosina has carried off the chairman of the council's Mitro on her shoulders again."

The chairman of the council found this amusing too, but he could not forget the young widow; he still dreamt of her at night and he gave a deep groan when his wife, alarmed by his moaning, woke him and asked if he was in pain.

"No," he replied feebly, "go to sleep, love, go to sleep..."

*Translated by Patrick Corness with Natalia Pomirko and Oksana Bunio*

From A **Book of Exotic Dreams and Real Events** (Lviv: Publishing House 'Piramida', 2012)

