It seems unlikely that a novella with an opening scene involving anonymous sexual encounters between men would turn out to be a fluid, poetic internal monologue on some of the weightiest universal issues out there—desire, power, art versus artifice, and currency of all kinds. Yet Garth Greenwell’s *Mitko* is exactly that. This wisp of a book—the first prose effort from the poet—is virtually humming with the anxieties of outsidership. The unnamed narrator is a high school teacher in Sofia, Bulgaria, an American transplant who is only beginning to grasp the language and struggling to navigate the cultural landscape as a newcomer to the post-Soviet society. His desires and fears are embodied by Mitko, a capricious young prostitute whose smile is winning yet damaged, much like the rest of him.

Greenwell’s characters are rounded yet enigmatic, especially Mitko. His appetites for priyati (boyfriends, or clients) and what they have to offer him materially, sexually, and emotionally paint him as more childlike than avaricious, though the narrator is never able to shake the paranoia that Mitko is casing his life in order to ultimately strip him bare. It is in fact the narrator who is obsessed with the “transactional” nature of their relationship, determined to ferret out Mitko’s true intentions and make a science of his erratic behavior. Alternately driven and revolted by his own desire, the narrator is forced to accept whatever Mitko is willing to offer him under the vague terms of their contract, an initial encounter that ends up stretching over several months. One long night, for example, he is forced to watch his exhaustion and tension.

Throughout, the narrator’s obsession that avoids the tired recasting so much current literature as a poet, which serves him, as a young child embracing

Her father’s body folded difficult for me to recognize the world. They embraced seldom seen in public the children, an intimacy the absolute possession. Perhaps embrace.

The novella’s intertext is reviled by the narrator—because The narrator acknowledges his obsession with Mitko’s expression his lover offers—choose to reveal to us, regardless.

A third main character, once glorious, conquered and to Soviet coexisting nonco- existing concrete bunkers against the that typify National Revolutionary National Palace of Culture baths, coated with damp. One of Mitko’s most poignant is up the wrong side of a famous promenade with vistas of addicts and littered with the.

He held a plastic bag in his face, burying his

Mitko excitedly Skype with a dozen other men on the narrator’s own laptop as he sits just out of the frame, catching bits and pieces of the intimate conversations in his exhaustion and tenuous grasp of Bulgarian.

Throughout, the narrator’s disquiet is delivered as an emotionally resonant meditation that avoids the tired trope of the neurotic, privileged male intellectual populating so much current literary fiction. This is due in part to Greenwell’s background as a poet, which serves him exquisitely, especially in passages like this one describing a young child embracing her father:

Her father’s body folded around her; she laughed with a kind of joy it was difficult for me to recognize, so certain it seemed of a home among the things of the world. They embraced each other for a long time, a kind of physical contact seldom seen in public, maybe seen only between parents and their very young children, an intimacy free of the anxieties or urgencies of sex and confident of absolute possession. Perhaps here, I thought to myself, was a wholly untheatrical embrace.

The novella’s interiority avoids navel-gazing or melodrama—a characteristic reviled by the narrator—because the monologue remains focused and contained. The narrator acknowledges, even while undermining himself again and again, that his obsession with Mitko’s artifice—his need to overanalyze every gesture and facial expression his lover offers—is essentially futile. All we know of others is what they choose to reveal to us, regardless of a language barrier or the nature of a relationship.

A third rain character, no less compelling than the others, is Bulgaria itself—once glorious, conquered and reconquered, with layers of history from Byzantine to Soviet coexisting nonchalantly. Greenwell recreates it compellingly, playing concrete bunkers against the “elaborate wooden structures and bright pastels” that typify National Revival–style architecture. He juxtaposes the hypermodern National Palace of Culture, a behemoth devoted to the arts, with its own basement bathrooms, coated with “dampness and filth” and frequented by fornicating men. One of Mitko’s most poignant scenes describes the narrator ascending, unwittingly, up the wrong side of a famous hillside park, half of which is a family-friendly public promenade with vistas of the city, the other a degraded landscape harboring drug addicts and littered with the debris of illicit sexual encounters:

He held a plastic bag in one of his hands, which now and again he would bring to his face, burying his mouth and nose in it and taking huge, famished breaths:
even from our distance we could see the heaving of his shoulders, which shook as if he were weeping. As he lowered the bag from his face there was a kind of softening in his posture, a sinking or relaxing of his frame and an unsteadiness on his feet; and then he would straighten suddenly, and advancing to the rusted rail thrust out his arms toward the city, an expression of longing or ecstasy or grief that haunts me still.

Bewildered by the landscape, and with Mitko as his frenetic tour guide, the narrator feels his anxiety come to a head in the seaside town of Varna, the violence of the sea amplifying the frustration between two men who are incapable of understanding one another. Even after the narrator is done with his story, the reader is left with the sense that, like Mitko, like all of us, he has carefully chosen how much of himself to reveal.

Until recently, readers of Robert Walser of the time, they've had to be both at front page news, and writers who could keep an interest in the twentieth century. Walser was a kind of secret whose mysteriousness seemed to hinder his popularization. And there were attempts. In college, a beetle-colored paper front and three more on the back from Musil, and Hermann Hesse. A single page to pique my interest—but all three to pique my interest—but all three were in my hands: tall and thin, it looked like an envelope that had suffered delays but in my hands I had to read it.

The distance that a given book is from the journey; the other half are the steps to the book. Reading Walser turned out to be surprisingly, disconcertingly easy. After

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Robert Walser
Berlin Stories

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