

**TADEJ
GOLOB**
VALLEY OF
FLOWERS

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**T A D E J
G O L O B**



VALLEY OF
FLOWERS

Proposal for a Book in Translation

Original Title (Slovene): **Dolina rož**

Author: **Tadej Golob**

Title in Translation: **Valley of Flowers**

Translator (English): **Gregor Timothy Čeh**

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About the book

Two bullet-ridden bodies in a bedroom, a third in the living room. Were the young wife and her lover shot by the cheated older husband who then also took his own life, or...?

Taras Birsa, the most popular criminal investigator in Slovenia, is left without a job. As a private detective he takes the odd assignment but feels a distinct lack of interesting cases coming his way. Until a fateful client walks into his office.

The successful third crime novel in the popular series by Tadej Golob, with its familiar characters that develop from one book to the next, climbed to the top of the bestseller list in the first week after publication and has since also been reprinted. Tadej Golob is not only a master of the genre but also an excellent stylist who has received numerous literary awards, including the prestigious Kresnik Award for best novel of the year.

About the author

Tadej Golob (born 1967) is a unique Slovene author with a thematically broad range of works. He is one of the authors of the book *From Everest* (Iz Everesta 2000), a mountain he has also climbed himself. He has also written biographies of sportsmen and singers and youth-fiction novels *Golden Tooth* (Zlati zob 2011) and *Where Did Brina Disappear To?* (Kam je izginila Brina? 2013) and adult fiction *Pigs' Feet* (Svinjske nogice 2009) which won the 2010 Kresnik Award 2010, and *Ali boma ye!* (2013). *The Lake* is his first crime novel.

About the translator

Gregor Timothy Čeh was born and brought up in a bilingual family in Slovenia. After studying at UCL in London he taught English in Greece and then completed a Masters at Kent. He now lives in Cyprus and regularly translates contemporary Slovene literature for publishing houses and authors in Slovenia, with translations published in both the UK and US.

Sample Chapters

*It smells of autumn
It smells of many deaths*

Mila Kachič, *Withered Leaves*

Introduction

“Zupet,” Brajc read out the name on the letter box by the gate leading into the yard of the town house in Rožna Dolina and immediately after that, without the slightest of pause that would indicate a change of subject, growled, “Damn weather!”

He looked up at the sky from under the roof above the gate in front of which he and Osterc were standing. It was raining, though not very heavily. “So, now we’re in for this, are we?”

Osterc stayed silent. He was about to mention that the rain which so infuriated Brajc was the first they had had in September even though they were almost half way through the month, but he knew there was no pleasing Brajc. Not even by keeping silent.

“Well? Surely not?”

Osterc edgily shook his head and pointed at the policeman who was approaching them along the path paved in what he could have sworn were top-of-the-range paving slabs in shades

of white, grey and black, something he could only dream about, though, when he thought about it more carefully, he had to admit that such paving was nor really appropriate for the yard in front of his prefab house on a hill above the outskirts of town. Luckily the policeman opened the gate before, for the sake of peace, he would have to lie to Brajc and agree with him that the weather was indeed terrible.

“I don’t envy you two at all,” said the policeman, shaking his head without greeting them. “This is...” he shook his head again and gestured for them to follow the white-grey-black nuances leading towards the front door.

Brajc peered at the sky again, reluctantly contemplating the twenty-or-so metre-long path, as if trying to decide whether to run or keep some form of dignity. He finally decided on a sort of compromise and made his way towards the house with what was not yet running but was also no longer just a walk. Osterc gave a slight nod of approval as they entered.

Brajc stopped in the hallway and looked at the wet shoe traces leading down the corridor into the house.

“Are these yours?” he asked the policeman and pointed at the wet footprints on the parquet floor for which Osterc, standing behind him, had already established the make and price per square metre.

“Mine,” the policeman nodded. Brajc had clearly not made a strong impression on him, perhaps because the uniformed policeman was around five years older and a few inches taller than the portly criminal investigator. “I needed to check whether anyone was still alive. I had no time for forensic hocus-pocus.”

Without intending to, Brajc smiled. This hocus-pocus thing sounded funny. He would use it on Golob.

“Who was the first on the scene?” Osterc asked. “Who called you?”

“The cleaning lady. She’s in the kitchen with my colleague.”

“And the slaughter is...?”

The policeman pointed down the corridor,

“Straight down there and right, in the living room. That’s where the first one is. There are two more up in the bedroom on the first floor.”

Brajc sighed and sat on a stool covered in red velvet. He beckoned to Osterc who handed him a pair of Tyvek shoe covers. Osterc put his own on standing up, scoring a resentful look from Brajc who was still struggling to pull the protective gear over his shoes.

“Do I really need to come with you?” the policeman asked and nodded, not without relief, when Osterc said he did not.

Along the long corridor, the walls of which were filled with taxidermy, they arrived at a door that opened automatically. Brajc who was in front, and a moment later also Osterc, were hit by the sharp smell of gunpowder and blood. Brajc stopped briefly and then walked into the room, twitching with surprise. The first thing he saw was a small cupboard on which sat a black cat, staring motionlessly at him with its yellow eyes.

“Shoo!” Brajc hissed at it, swinging his arm.

The cat did not move. He stepped closer. It too was taxidermy. He half turned towards Osterc, lifting his finger to his temple, but his hand stopped. Not only his hand, his entire body froze for a moment, then the finger that had stopped mid-gesture turned towards the corner of the room that Osterc was as yet unable to see.

About a metre to the left of the cupboard with the cat was a long cherry-red table with eight chairs of the same colour around it. Half the table was entirely empty but at the far end a man was spread across it with the top part of his body, with two boxes and an A4 sized white envelope next to him. He was sitting down, his body leaning across the table, his left cheek flat against the red surface due to which they at first did not notice

the pool of blood he was soaked in. When Brajc came closer, he realised the man was not sitting on a chair but in a wheelchair. His left hand hung limply by his body, his right across the table, still clinging onto a handgun. Next to it was a cardboard box of bullets, some of which had spilled out onto the table when it was knocked over. Some of them were empty, used cartridges. Next to the box was a smaller one, also tipped over, just like the one with the bullets. Three pills had rolled out of it and were lying a few centimetres away. Under the man's hand and under the gun lay an open envelope.

The man was obviously dead. Despite only a part of his cheek being visible, he was clearly an older man. Were it not for his thick, totally white hair, Brajc would have guessed by the skin on his hand and face that he must have been around eighty, if not older. In his temple was a small hole, maggots already appearing around its burnt edge.

Brajc looked at Osterc who was inspecting the dead man, his face motionless.

“Where did the wise guy say there was more of this?”

Osterc pointed to the door to the left of the dead man leading onto the corridor. From there another left turn would take them to where they started, a right turn brought them to the stairs leading to the upper floor. They followed the wet footprints that made Brajc shake his head a couple of times, and reached the wide open door to a brightly lit bedroom with its curtains drawn back. The bitter smell of death was even heavier here and Brajc had to cough before he entered the room.

On the big bed lay a couple, naked, partly covered with a sheet, riddled with shots from head to toe, a contorted expression on their faces. On the woman's face. There was little more than pulped blood, bones and skin left of the man's face, the perpetrator having fired a number of bullets straight at it.

“Oh, shit!” said Brajc.

They found both the policemen and the cleaning lady in the kitchen. The woman was smoking.

“You were the one to find them?” Brajc asked.

The woman nodded.

“And when was that?”

She glanced at the clock on the wall.

“An hour and a half ago.”

She spoke with a slight accent.

“And where are you from?”

“I have all my papers,” the woman hurriedly explained.

Brajc dismissively waved his hand. An hour and a half ago he had still been fast asleep. Just as well that it had taken the uniformed guys this long to figure out what was going on.

“Would you mind, Osterc...” he said, pointing at the woman but before Osterc had a chance to pull his notepad out of his bag and start his interrogation, Brajc noticed a small, neatly designed coffee machine at the end of the long kitchen counter. He walked across to it and found what looked like some kind of tablets in a box next to it. They reminded him of dishwasher tablets just that these were dark, almost black.

“Do you know how to use this?” he turned to the woman next to whom Osterc had just sat down with his open notepad.

The woman nodded.

“Why don’t you make us all a coffee first. You drink coffee too, don’t you?”

The woman nodded again.

“We have a boss that doesn’t,” he said to the policemen who nodded in sympathy. “He drinks nothing at all. So we have to jump at every chance.”

Before Brajc took his first sip, his phone rang. He looked at the name on the display,

“Speak of the devil,” he said and nodded at the policemen. “Someone open the door for him.”

A minute later a man in his mid-thirties stepped into the kitchen. He looked at Brajc and Osterc who was questioning the woman. Without a greeting he beckoned Brajc who stood up, gulped down his still-too-hot coffee and stepped after him. Brajc had not imagined he would miss Taras this soon and this much.

Chapter 1

“In the living room we have...” Brajc began explaining but the newcomer paid no attention to him, turning up the stairs towards the first floor.

He was around ten years younger than Brajc, fair-haired and of a sporty, fit build, but when people described him, their initial observation was usually something else. He was short, five foot seven, if that. Brajc was a good three inches taller than he was and should, bearing in mind his age and also appearances, seem like the man’s father were it not for the peculiar way Ahlin – that was the fair guy’s name – dressed. His sartorial choices looked like something his father or even his grandfather might have worn. In early September, when the weather could on some days still be quite hot, he would, as now, turn up at the office in a thin sweater with vertical braids leading to a crew neck, the collar of a white shirt poking out from underneath. When it rained, or rather, even at the slightest possibility of rain, he carried with him a black umbrella with a wooden handle, and every time he closed it, he folded the fabric carefully. It was quite possible that the umbrella was also his grandfather’s. He never smiled and if anyone told a joke that would make Osterc burst into laughter, all he was capable of was a slight twitch of the upper lip. Though, truth be told, Osterc never really burst into laughter either.

“Jakob Ahlin,” he had introduced himself to Brajc and Osterc when he had appeared, unannounced, in their office one morning at the beginning of July, without waiting for their boss Drvarič who had escorted him to say his own thing.

Jakob as in James, Jake... something similar... Brajc’s question was left lingering in the air with Jakob Ahlin – or as it emerged later just Ahlin, not even Jakob – not responding. Brajc looked at Drvarič who nodded,

“The new head of the group. Until further notice.”

“What about Taras?” Osterc asked.

Drvarič looked away in embarrassment.

“Who’s Taras?” asked Ahlin.

“He worked in Postojna and then in Koper,” Drvarič later explained to them. “Judging by the results he achieved down on the coast, we are lucky to have him.”

“What about Taras?” Osterc asked again.

Drvarič shrugged his shoulders,

“We’ll see.”

“Do you have any idea what’s going on?” Brajc asked Osterc once they were out of Drvarič’s office, as if it had not been Osterc who kept asking, What about Taras?

“No.”

When they returned to their office Ahlin was already there. Brajc tried with kindness,

“Welcome, Boss. Osterc and I were thinking of inviting you for a coffee, so we get to know each other and all that.”

When they walked in, Ahlin had been searching for something on the net and did not stop when Brajc addressed him.

“I suggest we stick to surnames.”

Brajc nodded confusedly. He hadn’t the faintest idea what could possibly be wrong with ‘Boss’.

“Sorry. What about the coffee?”

Ahlin finally lifted his gaze above the top edge of the computer screen. Only just.

“I don’t drink coffee.”

This, as it turned out, condemned Brajc to coffee from the vending machine. Osterc was indifferent on the matter. He drank tea anyway and even that was only because, over the years, he noticed that people gave him strange looks if he didn’t order anything.

Brajc followed Ahlin to the bedroom. Ahlin stopped at the door and from his bag where he kept his laptop and a few other things, produced a mobile phone into which he then dictated his observations. Calmly and self-confidently, in a loud voice, as if he was alone in the world, as if he was not standing next to two bullet-riddled bodies on the bed.

Brajc was now looking across Ahlin’s shoulder at the massacre on the bed. The woman, around thirty, was half covered with a bloodied sheet. The top part of her body and head were exposed and she had two bullet holes in her chest, right between her breasts. Another had probably hit her in the leg, there was another red stain at that end of the sheet. The man, whose age Brajc had difficulty in determining, was lying half under the woman. The top part of his face was missing. The eyes, nose, and half his forehead... were simply not there. Brajc sighed, lifted his gaze and noticed a dark painting above the bed. Mary with Jesus in her arms, sitting under a tree, old men and other onlookers around them, strangely bent, feeble, hunched, their arms, palms spread open, rising up towards her. Above Mary and the group of figures were some sketches of horses, in pencil or something similar, as if the author, whoever he was, had gotten fed up of the work and left it unfinished. Not something I’d sleep under, Brajc thought. What kind of person would hang that above their head?

“Is Golob here yet?” Ahlin asked, took a few more photos and put his phone away in his bag.

“No.”

Ahlin did not move his inquisitive stare away, so Brajc added, “In fifteen minutes. Apparently.”

Ahlin stepped straight past Brajc, walked down the stairs and turned into the living room. He stopped in front of the man in the wheelchair who was lying in the pool of his own blood that had spread along the edge of the table and trickled down to the floor, creating another pool around the wheelchair. Brajc glanced round the room, his gaze once again fixing on the cat. For a moment he again thought it was alive and touched its fur, as if wanting to just make sure that it was indeed stuffed.

“Everything in here is dead,” he said.

Ahlin once again opened his bag and pulled out his mobile phone. This time he first took some snapshots and then began dictating his observations.

He’s certainly methodical, thought Brajc with an irony that showed on his face. Golob will of course bring a photographer with him who will do the job properly. Osterc walked in through the door and stood next to Brajc. Ahlin gave no indication that he had noticed his arrival and continued to look at the man slouched across the table. When he did turn around, he gave Osterc a questioning look. Brajc found this silent interrogation irritating and tried to counter it with a gaze that would return the question, a silent, ‘What’s up?’

Osterc, even if it did annoy him, and it probably didn’t, never let on.

“The cleaning lady arrived at eight in the morning. She rang the bell but nobody came to the door, so she entered the house...”

“Entered?” Ahlin asked.

He picked up a planner, flipped through it, placed it on the table and took snapshots of a couple of the pages.

"I'm listening," he said when Osterc stayed silent.

"The gate was left ajar," Osterc explained. "She walked up to the front door and rang the bell there as well. When nobody answered, she checked to see whether the door was locked. It wasn't. She walked in and found the bodies."

"All of them?" asked Ahlin. "She found all three?"

Osterc did not understand.

"Did she find all three bodies?"

"Yes... Apparently she went up to the upper floor first. She always does that when she comes to clean. That is where she starts. Then she rushed down the stairs, saw the third body and ran out into the street, to the nearest coffee shop, outside the student halls. That is where she called us from."

Ahlin listened to Osterc's report with his head turned towards the dead man, without really looking at the corpse. Only when Osterc had finished did he turn to him again.

"How come she went into the living room?"

"She doesn't know."

"She doesn't know or you didn't ask?"

"She doesn't know," said Osterc with a trace of annoyance in his voice. "What she did say," he continued as if he was immediately embarrassed he had shown his irritation, "was that the woman upstairs is apparently this guy's wife. She did not recognize the man in the bed."

"Not even his mother would recognize that one", said Brajc who had had enough of this silence – question, silence – question, silence... Damn, this was like school. Taras too had his moments of silence, but he never pestered everyone else with it.

Ahlin, once again without any kind of warning, pushed past them into the corridor and disappeared into the kitchen. Brajc looked at Osterc, frustratedly bending the fingers of his right hand into claws that he would have so liked to grab the brat's neck with and shake some manners into him. Then he dropped

his arms and stepped out into the corridor where Golob with his team were just making their way into the house.

“Based on what I have seen, I can say the following with considerable certainty,” Golob began when, a few hours later, they had finished their work and Brajc’s stomach was already rumbling though he did not dare mention that to Ahlin. There would be no point. Ahlin had spent the entire time lurking like a shadow above the forensic team, his phone in hand. He made notes on it, though nobody knew what about since neither Golob nor the technicians spoke much as they worked. For Golob, who normally liked lecturing, this was unusual, but perhaps he too felt that he was on some kind of test.

Brajc and Osterc in the meantime went to see the neighbours, the two houses on the same side of the street, to the left and right of the villa with the bodies, and the two houses opposite. These were residential buildings built in the 1970s or even earlier. In their dimensions and ostentation they were no comparison with the villa they had been called to. Despite the fact that it was mid-week, they found their residents at home. All of them retired. None had seen anything, and more surprisingly, none had heard anything.

“Quite a busy place, that house,” one neighbour on the opposite side of the street said meaningfully when Osterc lowered his notepad.

“What do you mean, busy?” Brajc asked him. “Yesterday?”

“Dunno about yesterday. I mean, in general. He certainly had lots of visitors,” said the neighbour and nodded as if Brajc was supposed to figure out from his nodding what kind of visitors he meant.

“What kind of visitors?”

The man was unable to explain what was so special about these visitors and when Brajc simply wanted to find out what the

hell he had meant with *busy* and his meaningful nodding, he just muttered something like,

“Come to think of it, the place wasn’t really that busy at all.”

“I saw you as you drove down the street this morning...” a woman of around sixty from the house right next to the villa said when they had already thanked her for cooperating. She too had not heard any gunshots.

“Yes?” said Brajc.

“I know you couldn’t have known, but in this neighbourhood we stop at the crossroads even if we’re on a priority road. The people from this area...”

“Right,” Brajc interrupted her and looked at Osterc whose face was as indifferent as usual. He turned back to the woman, nodding at her with excessive praise,

“I will recommend you for a golden badge, ma’am.”

He did not mention what kind of badge he had in mind and, had he not thought of this way of getting out of further discussion with the woman, he would have lost patience entirely. He returned to the house red with fury.

“Primož Klun,” said Marn, one of the technicians of the criminal investigating team that they met in the corridor as he held the ID card up for them to see. “We found this in the poor sod’s stuff up there. If this is his, then the guy with half his face missing is someone called Primož Klun.”

When they were back in the kitchen that had, without any particular arrangement, become the centre of their operations here, Osterc looked at his computer to check the Central Population Register, typing in the name Primož Klun. The computer brought up the man’s photograph, which, at a glance, indeed looked like it could be that of the man in the bedroom upstairs. A search in the register also brought up information

on marital status, children and cars owned. There was no wife or children. Brajc in the meantime was poking through the cupboards and refrigerator, determining with disappointment that the owner of the house was most probably vegetarian. He found some bread and spread some butter and jam on a slice, eating it in a hurry in case Ahlin were to appear and stare at him with telepathic reproach.

“The persons on the upper floor, a woman aged around thirty and a man aged around forty, died of gunshot wounds that they were incapable of inflicting themselves,” Golob reported, glancing at each of those present individually, Ahlin, Brajc, Osterc and the criminal investigation technician Marn.

A metal coffin was just being carried through the corridor behind them. Golob fell silent for a moment, waiting for it to be taken to the blue van that had parked so close to the door it was virtually not necessary to step outside.

“Especially the wounds we found on the man...”

“We saw,” said Ahlin.

Golob gave him an annoyed look. We all saw everything, he thought to himself, though that probably does not mean we all know how to interpret it all correctly. After all, among those present only he had a doctorate on the subject.

“Go on,” said Ahlin as if he was able to read his mind and at the same time ignore it.

“The woman was shot three times, of which – Dr Cvilak will be able to give more details on this – the two shots to her chest were fatal. The third hit her leg, her thigh. The man was also shot three times, once in the abdomen and twice in the face. Any of these could have been fatal.”

He fell silent for a moment, waiting for Ahlin to stop typing into his phone.

“The older man,” he continued, “... for whom it is hard to say precisely, but is around...”

“Eighty,” Osterc helped him.

Golob shrugged his shoulders.

“It is hard to say. Well, the older man appears to have killed himself.”

There was an uneasy pause. He did not even know why he used this phrase. But with nobody reacting he continued.

“A single shot to the right side of his skull, in the temple. The bullet went through the skull. He was still holding the weapon, a handgun, when we found him. There were no more bullets in the barrel, just a single empty cartridge. Six empty cartridges on the table. I leave the conclusions to you.”

“He was seventy-one,” said Ahlin. Then he sank back into thoughts of his own, his gaze still directed at Golob but looking straight through him. He was not bothered by the silence that lingered after what Golob had said, or by the gazes that now turned to him. His hand reached up to move a lock of hair that had fallen across his forehead and he once again became absorbed in thought.

“Perhaps you should take a look at this,” said Marn and placed the A5 sized envelope in front of Ahlin. It had dark red stains all over it. Ahlin looked at Marn, then the envelope, and then Golob.

“Might I have a pair of gloves?”

Golob stood up, left the room without a word, and returned a minute later with a pair of latex gloves. He silently placed them in front of Ahlin who donned them and carefully opened the envelope, pulling out the folded pages and a number of photos attached to them with a paper clip. He put the photos on the table and began reading.

It took him a few minutes to read the three A4 pages filled with – as far as Osterc could see from where he was standing – text in 12 point Calibri Light. He placed the pages on the table, one next to the other, found his phone in his bag, and took

snapshots of each one separately. Then he picked up the photos and looked at them carefully. Brajc, Osterc and Golob stood behind him. Only Marn, who had clearly already seen the contents of the envelope, stayed on the other side of the table.

The photographs, shot from a distance with a telephoto lens through the glass front of a shop, showed the girl entering a Vitaslim fitness centre. The next was of the same girl in front of a shopping centre and another outside the Dance & Move school of dance. The photos were well shot, as if the photographer had taken their time over them. They did not at all seem like paparazzi shots, at least not ones that would only be interested in capturing the recognisable face of their 'victim'.

Then there was the different format of photographs and a change in content. In a series of images placed on the table by Ahlin, the man and woman were in bed having sex. Judging by the heads and limbs that were often missing from the frame and the fuzzy focus on some of them, these images were probably shot with an automatic shutter release, like some, not-always-successful selfies. Despite the fact that standing behind Ahlin he did not need to, Brajc stood on his tiptoes. Ahlin then gathered the photos and put them back into the envelope, picking up the printed pages from the table. He opened them up and half turned to the three men standing behind him, almost as if he had only just noticed them. He gave them a look that made them all immediately sit back down in their chairs. Then he monotonously read out part of the text from the first page.

“7 September, 9.34: A parks her car outside Vitaslim. She stays at the gym until 10.55...”

Without turning towards the others, he continued reading the first two pages with minimal fluctuation in the volume or tone of his voice.

“... then she drives to the BTC Shopping Centre where she stays until 15.00.”

It only rose, ever so slightly, when he reached the last page, just about enough for Brajc, Osterc and Golob to understand,

“8 September, 22.00. A receives B. After a brief chat and drink on the ground floor, they go to upstairs the bedroom. Photos enclosed.”

“Seems someone was jealous...” Brajc spoke first though he had vowed not to.

Ahlin turned to Osterc who, instead of responding to the unasked question, just looked at Golob. It was as if the questioning gaze bounced onwards.

“I will let you know when we have finished in the lab. I did not study forensics all those years to end up guessing now.”

“Well, if we’ve finished here...” said Brajc and stood up from the table.

Ahlin also stood up, followed by Osterc, Golob and Marn, but when Brajc was almost at the door, in a hurry to find some food, Ahlin spoke again.

“There is one other thing,” he said in a low voice.

“The person who wrote this report,” he pointed at the envelope Golob was holding, “...signed it. Did you not notice?”

He looked at Marn who lowered his eyes with embarrassment.

“It is unusual that nobody pointed that out to me.”

He looked at Brajc and Osterc. Brajc shrugged his shoulders. He was not the one dealing with the envelope, so why should he care?

“It is signed Taras Birsa. Does the name not ring a bell with you?”



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foto: Robert Kruh

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