

INTRODUCTION

Tsvetanka Elenkova's oblique lyrics might be described as a way to think through your life if your life has been touched by Christian iconography, particularly the Eastern tradition of icon painting, by the sights and sounds of modern cities, and by a sensitive alertness to the minutiae of nature—water drops, the way flowers furl and unfurl, the interplay of light and shade. History and private life, as they play out in her poems, are more the collocation of these qualities than an announced subject.

Her temperament is a quiet one, uninterested in showy gestures, whether poetical or political. She grew up at a transitional point in Bulgaria's history—as if there were any other kind for this war-torn crossroads between East and West. Born in 1968, she spans the generation that grew up under Communism, but saw it transform into democracy—sort of. The Communism of the Balkans—an intensely nationalistic pride in local culture, and a deep skepticism about Communism as both an institution and an ideology—and the democracy that replaced it, are in certain ways depressingly similar: widespread corruption, the bureaucrats from the old regime the same as in the new. Given such a jaundiced relation to political reality, her view of it is necessarily ambivalent. And you might say that this ambivalence has translated into a style that embraces paradoxes, but feels no need to resolve them. Her poem "Collusion" admirably displays this by remaining resolutely hard to pin down, whether in its syntactic or intellectual commitments.

In the poem, "one click" (of a trigger? a locked door?) results in your being "on the outside"—though on the outside of what is more difficult to say: a community united by hate, by militarism? Or is this "outside" more a form of spiritual alienation, the sign of a divided self?

One click
and you're on the outside
or have lost a finger
children especially
with every folding-unfolding

of wings
I saw on TV
the loading of cartridges
of tubes for gas
buttons even—
the tapping of blind men's sticks
on studded pavements by a crossing—
this absolute unconditional fit
whatever comes before
though often it's euphoria
has nothing in common with
a gentle knock at the door

This poem is typical in its use of juxtaposition ("blind men's sticks" with "tubes of gas") to suggest political and moral commitments that resist easy analysis: are the blind men the victims, or the avatars, of state violence? Similarly, the "gentle knock at the door" could be sinister, soothing, or both. By the same token, the quality of the "euphoria" also remains ambiguous: is it war hysteria, the high of going into battle, the Christian militant "marching as to war"? And is that "gentle knock at the door" what Osip Mandelstam would hear as the civilizing knock of a world humanism that values human solidarity as part of our better natures: the natures that partake of every "folding-unfolding of wings"? But even that image refuses to resolve into angelic intimations—it could simply be a natural, animal process that can't be assimilated to human purposes, whether for good or evil.

But the way these poems avoid direct statement isn't spiritual inertia or stylistic caginess, but the bedrock of their moral integrity. The poet's devotion to registering the literal sound of blind men's sticks, as well as that tapping's potential symbolic value, is what gives many of her poems the aura of fragmented perception. But that fragmented perception never flaunts itself as a method, as so much contemporary American poetry seems to do. Perception, after all, is never a method—it's an experience, an experience that makes objective Elenkova's

lightning shifts between mind and sense, her intellectual ponderings and her perceptual acuity. When she says in her poem "Altar" that "the other side of perspective/ is dimension/ near-far light-shade", you can sense the seamlessness between "perspective" and "dimension" as technical terms in painting and philosophical concepts—a seamlessness that indicates that fragmentation of syntax in her work is a spiritual necessity, as opposed to a rote stylistic maneuver.

Elenkova's devotion to dramatizing these quick shifts between mind and eye, eye and heart, help to give her poems a spiritual immediacy that bypasses the formalizing rituals and conventions of most religious poetry, whether those rituals and conventions be Christian, Buddhist, or what have you. It's as if she writes a devotional poem that's stripped of any conscious designs on the reader—as if the intensity of her experience is overheard as opposed to broadcast, shared out unawares, rather than being pressed into our notice. The essence of these poems is a prayerful relation to the world, but without being directed to God, or asking for something in return for her belief. All the poet asks is that language, as it makes its way to the page, remain vital and alert, as it embraces human conundrums and paradoxes.

—Tom Sleigh