

Özmen's verse also explores existential dimensions, such as in the first section of the three-part "Blemish," a title that recalls, in passing, the "flaw" mentioned in the first line of "Partitions":

The valley opened its secret to me
I found you on a vast plain
When the leaf dropped, the fig fell silent

There was a scorched side to me
And I placed you there

Take those sweet waters, those heady scents
A woman pours a river into you
And what was far comes nearer still

Stay on the other side of touch
Embrace the absence you take me for

—Wind that blows through us
is picking up leaves somehow

Here are those natural metaphors once again, those unpunctuated line breaks, those dizzying loose connections, all applied to the theme of love, as well as to other themes. Özmen's verse is often polysemous in ways that are pleasurable to work out. The biographical notes reveal that Messo is preparing a selection of her poetry. I am impatient to read it!

The Seventh Gesture: Tsvetanka Elenkova

The Seventh Gesture consists of seventy-seven—the number is surely no coincidence—prose poems that are nearly all the same length: nine printed lines. I mention these arithmetic facts not because these subtle, gently thought-provoking texts written by the Bulgarian poet Tsvetanka Elenkova (b. 1968) and smoothly translated by Jonathan Dunne are chilly, austere, or formally intimidating in any way, nor because they seem generated in accordance with some esoteric numerical scheme. On the contrary, the author of *Amphipolis of the Nine Roads* (1998) writes poetic prose that is full of human warmth and that addresses essential questions involving love, the family, death, and Christian Orthodox theology. Yet mathematics comes to mind because of the regularity of the page layout and also because her prose poems function like equations. That is, a poetic equation that begins with a fact, an object, an event, or an observation, takes off from it briefly and even sometimes heads off on a tantalizing tangent before producing an unexpected result. After Elenkova's poetic calculus has done its job (and oblique transitions play a key role in the inner logical apparatus), the result, which is usually a subdued surprise ending, often represents a matter of existential import that cannot be deduced from the initial context and that will linger long in the reader's mind.

A case in point is "Hall of Distorting Mirrors," which, like several other pieces here, alludes to Greece and, indeed, draws on geometry:

Every fair has its hall of distorting mirrors. The extended projection of the Parthenon, asserts Seferis, is a pyramid. Reflected, the pyramid looks like an ellipse, and the lemon-tree in my yard with the five tips is probably a circle. Albeit not ideal. So many edges, shapes, images, points of glass, you'd say, so jagged, why reflect them? Why iron clothes that should be worn creased? Natural edges cannot be

smoothed out, even with steam—from a combination of moisture and sun. From agitation. You wipe the mirror. For a rear view.

This “rear view” that reveals oneself to oneself is likewise characteristic. Even more typical is looking forward. Although many different, mostly natural things—dogs, cats, beetles, fruit, mountain summits, the sponges of Symi, a mother’s breast, a musician’s or a poet’s hand—crop up in Elenkova’s poems, her goal is not to describe them as such but rather to use them almost as “gestures” pointing to deep, hidden feelings about being alive or to potential vantage points from which we can look out on ourselves, our loved ones, or speculative transcendent possibilities such as God. In one poem, Elenkova offers three metaphors for explaining the divine Trinity to her “unborn daughter,” before handing on her own experience: “When one spring you look at the *Milky Way* with the first drop of blood in your knickers, you’ll understand what God is. Then you won’t want to wash it off. No, you won’t.”

Evocations of the body occur often in *The Seventh Gesture* and inevitably blossom into broader themes. In “Humility Is Never Enough,” the poet departs from the functioning of the eye’s pupil and arrives at solitude and death:

When in the dark, before you enter the room, switch on the light—on the threshold itself—the pupil swallows the iris, its black swells not for the darkness but to let even the slightest ray through. When it is greedy like this, even lifeless: light to dark, more than a camera lens focusing on an insect on a flower. More than a photograph taken into the sun. And you close the *lid* then. You close the *eyelids*. Or someone else does. You’re the seed of a plant that sows itself alone.

There are other solitary moments in *The Seventh Gesture*, an allusion or two to the end of love (signified by “the black reel before *The End* of old films”) but also several positively connoted signs of intimacy with others. Poems about the poet’s grandmother are particularly touching. An undefined “you” in many poems balances out a narrative “I” that Elenkova employs elsewhere with naturalness and simplicity. When she is an autobiographer, she is a discreet one as she crafts these meditations that engage us all. This is poetry that often establishes an implicit dialogue with the reader.

The Wonder-like Lightning of Prose Poetry

In *Petites formes en prose après Edison* (1987), the French novelist Florence Delay (b. 1941) associates short prose forms with the “Nature’s short form, lightning,” then aligns two striking one-liners spanning some 2600 years:

Lightning pilots the universe.
Heraclitus, 6th century B.C.

L’éclair me dure (“Lightning lasts in me, makes me last”).
René Char, 20th century A.D.

“Poets and philosophers quickly understood all the meaning offered by this natural form,” adds Delay. “For what is a short form if it is not a maximum of meaning in a minimum of words?”

Her preface is itself prefaced by a lightning-quick quip made by Lichtenberg: “A preface could be entitled ‘lightning rod.’” Delay emphasizes that, when it comes to literary brevity, we can be faced with essential qualities that have nothing to do with word counts. Moving from the Latin *acutum* through the French *acuité*, the Italian *acutezza*, and especially the Spanish *agudeza* (with hints taken from the seventeenth-century short-prose master Baltasar Gracián, who wrote an *Agudeza y arte de ingenio*), Delay argues that a common characteristic of many short forms of prose and poetry is that they possess an acute, sharp “point.”

Indeed, something short in literature can be much more than merely shorter than something longer: it can be utterly different on deep rhetorical and stylistic levels engaging the thoughts, feelings, and mental pictures that are provoked in us, as readers, not to mention the sounds that we hear. And the author of short pieces certainly often hopes that his or her words will strike like lightning, though other writers