

# TSVETANKA ELENKOVA

*(Bulgaria)*

## Masochists

Because from an early age we endure pain. Except for birth perhaps, which our mothers bear. And that's why birth pangs are so strong. Until the walnut's husk darkens, until it hardens, until the green outer covering falls away. Until it no longer dirties our fingers. Until the bitterness loses its taste. Until many months, seasons go by and someone cracks open the walnut. Fallen before from your grandfather's sack. Because it is hollow – a real relic, the nut. From a metre sixty to a mere sixty. That's why we are masochists. Inwardly.

ELENKOVA

## Like Ticks

Every day my cat brings in ticks. Normally on its legs or its most sensitive part, where all the arteries pass. Poppy-seeds, the ticks: small and black, but having drunk their fill, they blossom. I saw two – on the trunk of a date-palm in Rhodes and on a stone in Delphi. And all around drops of blood, all around whole puddles. Crushed ones. I look up and spy several black clots – olives. Who says, when we love we don't need another to feed us? As a mother feeds her child.

## Time

Time fills with words *drop after drop* like a sink with the plug in. Time also has an overflow. Two or three who couldn't bear it and left. A few stayed behind to measure time. Some fidgeted on their chairs, handed each other notes, whispered in their neighbour's ear; girls lifted air with their skirts, not having aprons as their grandmothers did. Others listened carefully (you'd say they've an exam soon) and took notes. In the hall it was stuffy. *Drop after drop* trickled down their foreheads.

## Sixty

You wind the car and set it down on the carpet. Towards the end it *whirrs* fast *whirrs*, just before the water collected in the spout runs out. Drops not like those of stalactites, centuries to accumulate in one spot, but like a pulsimeter, turning idly. Like the first, faltering steps of a child, making a bee-line for its mother. How it laughs at the car and claps its hands – one, two, three times. The car *weaves* fast *weaves*, especially when it encounters an obstacle, turning idly. 'Time flies,' my mother would say, 'after sixty.'

## There Is Life in Death

As leaves fall in autumn, someone chops down trees, stacks them next to the stone wall, someone builds a fire and pokes the yule-log, later brushes the ash – just a few embers in which to bake potatoes; as the river sweeps up trees, having burst its banks, and deposits them on the stones; as in spring the autumn leaves are different – dry, bone dry, brittle, scratching nails; like the relics of saints, Thracian warriors in the museum – limestone in a child's coffin: so death also dies.

## The Day

The day dawns rosy as a baby's bottom. Soft and smelling of fluff. With yellow around its mouth. And down on its little head. Only one small cloud of saliva, as it sucks. The day dawns with birds cooing. Sometimes, if it's a boy, in blue. Nappies of pure cotton. But we neither teach it nor mimic it. We do not give it rattles or teething rings. The day, lonely as an abandoned baby in front of an orphanage, waits for someone to pass, to take a fancy to it, finally to show it on the news. Let's hope the parents have it back.

## Humility Is Never Enough

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.

## Under the Victim's Nails

for my father, Stefan Elenkov

If skin has memory, as doctors maintain, it means the house you leaned on last, the sea you swam in, have not forgotten. Only my dresses have forgotten, because I take them to be dry-cleaned or wash them often. But our sea, which is so enclosed streams can't reach it – the vertical wall under the eaves the wet can't get to – they have not forgotten. Like a pelican's bill or a camel's hump, they save the memory for a rainy day. Like a victim's nails, which still keep hairs from a killer's skin.

*Translated by Jonathan Dunne*