

The Seventh Gesture

The Seventh Gesture

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*Translated by
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CONTENTS

Translator's Foreword	9
Poetry's Tail	13
The Wounds of Freedom	14
Masochists	15
Like Ticks	16
With Wings and Teeth	17
Beetles	18
<i>All's Well that Ends Well</i>	19
Change of Water Main	20
<i>The Last Will Be First . . .</i>	21
Driving Is Not for Everyone	22
In the Scheme of the Cosmos	23
Hall of Distorting Mirrors	24
Men's <i>Ties</i>	25
Time	26
Sixty	27
There Is Life in Death I	28
There Is Life in Death II	29
Small Stations	30
It's Dawn Outside	31
The Day	32
Inanimate Nature	33
Illnesses	34
Passport Photos	35
Colours Are Laid in the Dark	36
<i>The End</i> of Old Films	37
Humility Is Never Enough	38
Olympics	39
The Scene Is Important	40
My Son's Night Eyes	41
Somebody Winks at Me	42
Under the Victim's Nails	43
The Spark in Us	44
Likes Attract	45

<i>When the Facts Speak for Themselves,</i>	
<i>Even the Gods Are Silent</i>	46
Orpheus and Eurydice	47
The Time We Are Together	48
Osiris and Isis	49
Donkey and Dove, the Word	50
Athens, Five O'clock	51
Safety Valves	52
Advice for My Unborn Daughter	53
Why the Spirit Creates Matter	54
Your Body, a Garden	55
I Want You Exhausted	56
Of Stones and Worms	57
The Music of the Flesh	58
Elders	59
Of Flies and Monks	60
By the Crown or Roots	61
As in an Amphitheatre	62
Whitsun Eve	63
Poems' Funeral	64
My Brother Was Writing Poetry	65
Poets' Mouths	66
Wisdom—A Purged Conscience	67
The Knots of Winds	68
Cherni Vrah	69
The Other Mediterranean	70
Sweetness Is in the Sun	71
Solar Eclipse	72
On the Equinox of Dough	73
Slaughter	74
Self-Sacrifice	75
<i>With a Shirt on Your Back</i>	76
The Veil	77
Lizard's Tail	78
Good and Evil Are at Odds	79
Freedom Is Closeness	80
The Legend of Narcissus	81

The Seventh Gesture	82
Day One—The Giving of Fire	83
Day Two—The Light in Us	84
Day Three—The Dilemma with the Snake	85
Day Four—Leonardo's Cross	86
Day Five—The Natural <i>Sieve</i>	87
Day Six—The Crucifix	88
Day Seven—Birthday	89

Translator's Foreword

There are two things that are rarely talked about in childhood: sex and death. And this is why so many teenagers rebel, dye their hair, pierce their nose, become independent travellers, because there's a question they're too afraid to ask and an answer their parents do not know.

I have learned the answer, but it has left me stranded like a whale on the beach, it hasn't given me wings, as I expected, or it has but then it's placed me at the centre of a storm, under the net, and I only glimpse the silhouette of my freedom, like a butterfly on the wall of a roofless church, most of the time it's a burden, a weight I carry around. You see, we only begin to see when we learn that we are blind.

This was my experience translating this book, *The Seventh Gesture*, by the international Bulgarian author Tsvetanka Elenkova. I use the word 'author' lightly, for we are all translators, nothing begins with us, not even the life we give our children. We are called to translate and in the process to find meaning. Meaning is a tentative thing, open to interpretation. Do spiders fly, or do birds follow an invisible path? Is the experience of death akin to returning to the water from whence we came (a theory espoused by the Book of Genesis as much as by evolutionists, meaning again slippery, clothes turned inside out which no one notices)? This book taught me to find life in death, a dead tree bathed in light. This book taught me to follow the diffraction of light in a bruise, proving that we are indeed children of light (that teenager again before he dons a suit and tie and enters the world of make-believe). Or how about illnesses that come from outside and form a lump in our throat? Only after reading this book did I realise the storm has a face, a body, which tells us it's coming, like a scent.

Coincidence means things that happen together, not chance happenings. This is the only language I know and language, as any parent will tell you, is the ability to envisage the future, a dangerous gift, of course, like fire, but also beneficial.

I interpret coincidence and find meaning. A ladybird lands on the dashboard of our car I have seen before, again like a translation. I give it meaning and so I open my hand. To believe is to receive sight, but there needs to be some kind of catalyst, a revelation.

May this book (in translation—it doesn't matter whether you're reading it in English or Bulgarian) serve as a revelation, a gesture towards a country, Bulgaria, and its culture still unknown.

Jonathan Dunne

for my mother

The living ideal of God's love precedes our love and
holds in itself the secret of its idealisation.

VLADIMIR SOLOVYOV, *The Meaning of Love*

Strong white resembles black.

LAO TZU, *Tao Te Ching*

POETRY'S TAIL

You wave the wand and know exactly where your wave will end. As the artist strokes a brush across the canvas, as the conductor signals *allegro vivace*, as the godmother turns the pumpkin into a carriage. You don't stop suddenly but smoothly, gradually tapering off. Which in time can be compared to wearing out a pair of shoes. Sliding away. Which in time can be compared to the same pair of shoes on ice. But what's most important—the curve at the end. The Bulgarians incorporated it into the buckles of their belts.

THE WOUNDS OF FREEDOM

Some buy leather leads for dogs of a definite length. Others prefer automatic leads with a reel. You let the dog run at will but you decide when to retrieve it. I set mine free. But two or three times it ran away and came back covered in wounds, so now I set it free but only in my yard. My dog howls at the squirrels, in the evening at the moon. And when we pile firewood next to the fence it climbs up and jumps over it. And again comes back with wounds. After that I decided to keep it on a chain. For my dog to be free of wounds.

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.

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.

WITH WINGS AND TEETH

Where is the difference? Is it in the lack of plumage or of teeth? Only people, I think, are born without teeth and all their life hope for wings. Demons and angels must have created them. Some lose their teeth, others only have teeth left. If you're a treasure-hunter, you'll understand. But I never found anyone with wings. Only with *shards*, which tormented my grandmother and bent her double—dung-beetle. When we buried her with two lilies of the *valley*, when a grassblade *welled* up from the sprinkling, I saw them. Growing transparent.

BEETLES

I love beetles because of their two pairs of wings. Because they can be butterflies and bats simultaneously. They can cut with their wings and flutter. Be old women and young brides. The ladybird is my favourite. Because of the Orthodox principle in it (the many churches on its wings) and because it shows me the way. Or the way of my darling. Or maybe because it is part of a girls' game, a continuation of that children's game, in which you pluck the leaves on which it crawls and cleans up the greenfly: *'He loves me, he loves me not . . .'*