

# JAMES SUTHERLAND - SMITH

## *Mayflies*

*i.m. James Merrill (1926-1995)*

I sunbathe at the bottom of a well of green,  
A thousand thousand tints; beech, acacia, pine  
With its new growths of emerald buds, the linden  
Whose scent is sharpest before storms, a birch tree's sheen  
Or tinfoil glimmer in the breeze mayflies still rise upon.

Squinting, I look away from a stem's jade tip  
To the vivid spider centred in a beer bottle top.  
Rayed like a star it might sense a whole world in its grip.  
It only has to wait and wait for something to drop  
From what must seem to be nothingness as mayflies still rise up.

There's a warbler in the lindens whose stuttering cries  
Are answered by another from the slope of beech trees.  
A third also stakes a claim for territories.  
I can't make any of them out so my gaze  
Focuses on the space where mayflies still rise,

Miniature Chinese kites with split hairs for tail  
Or the angels that dance on the end of a needle.  
How many since morning have dizzied up from the pool?  
How many hemi-demi-semi-quavers in a warbler's trill?  
What else except death can make mayflies still?

Close to, my face must seem to them immense in size,  
A wall of folds and sweat, monstrous grey-green eyes  
Yet less eloquent with harm than the warbler's cries  
Whose replies are questions and questions more replies  
Unheeded by their prey which cannot hear: mayflies

## *The Light in the Elderberry*

It's impossible to put into words, into sound,  
The light in the elderberry  
From the midday sun in February,  
In the wild hair of twigs tangling from central shoots  
Down to chunks of unmelted snow  
Among logs left to decay.

Above us is a sky so blue it must be the ultimate  
In the scattering of light.  
And we crane our necks as if about  
To see all the way through to deep space and star shine.  
*Just photograph the light*  
Says my serious Russian friend.

And so I focus on the hard glints and knife blade sheen  
In snow and elderberry buds.  
Below us the Malá Deľna thuds,  
Whose groan can be heard soft or loud from the ravine  
According to weather or season  
Ten feet from our cabin.

When we go back I'll take shots of its sinuous water,  
A cold muscle which flows  
Between the remnants of the snows  
Around the cabin and I'll put the prints with one I took  
In Libya twenty years ago  
Of fresh steak on a butcher's hook.

Nearby bullock heads had been piled into an old dustbin lorry  
Painted in the corporation green  
Of nineteen-fifties Britain.  
Long lashed Black Angus eyes stared as if they still had sight.  
*Just photograph the light*  
Said my serious Russian friend.