

Robert Olen Butler

VASIL BUKHALOV

Bulgarian agricultural aid worker, beheaded by the Iraqi Salafist Brigade of Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, 2004

On my tongue the bitter bite of green walnut Baba's face in the lamp light her hands black from the peeling of the skins the nuts inside white and very soft too young yet to be hardened and I eat another and another until bitter is sweet to me and the cheese she gives me is soft as well and tastes like the goat's milk after it's turned and it tastes also of the stable floor and of the rutted earth and I make a face I am very young and Baba puts her hand on mine and she says *eat more and you will find the taste is good* and then her hand touches my face *you look like your grandfather in this light* and I have seen a picture on a postcard of Diado and I will look again to see if I can find my own face and I look into my own son's face and see Diado's eyes and I make cheese and I grow pears and I give my son a curl of cheese from my fingertip and he makes a sour face and Baba lays her forearm beneath the piss-spill of the lamp and she shows me the number there, faint, in blue, *I was in Macedonia because of your grandfather and they took us* and this is all she says and we eat bitter herbs and they taste sweet to me now

Note

"Vasil Bukhalov" is one of sixty-two heads published in April, 2005, in a French edition entitled *Mots de Tête* to coincide with a ballet based upon the book that was performed in Lyon. The English language edition will appear next year as *Severance*, published by Chronicle Books.

Epigraphs for *Severance*

After careful study and due deliberation it is my opinion the head remains conscious for one minute and a half after decapitation.

Dr. Dassy d'Estaing, 1883

In a heightened state of emotion, we speak at the rate of 160 words a minute.

Dr. Emily Reasoner, *A Sourcebook of Speech*, 1975