PENGUIN BOOKS

BLACK MILK

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Black Milk

ON THE CONFLICTING DEMANDS
OF WRITING, CREATIVITY,
AND MOTHERHOOD

ELIF SHAFAK

Translated by Hande Zapsu

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For three females,
Beyza, Aurora and Zelda

For seventy years I have been steadily lowering and lowering my opinion of women, and I must still lower it more. The woman question! How could there not be a woman question! Only not about how women should control life, but how they should stop ruining it.

—Tolstoy the Misogynist

The goal of our life should not be to find joy in marriage, but to bring more love and truth into the world. We marry to assist each other in this task.

—Tolstoy the Feminist

I feel great tenderness for her [his daughter Masha]. Her only. She makes up for the others, I might say.

—Tolstoy again

Note to the Reader

I was in Istanbul when the earthquake hit in 1999. At the time I lived in one of the most vibrant and diverse neighborhoods in the city, where the quality of houses varied as widely as the stories of the people who inhabited them. When I ran out of the building with everyone else at three in the morning amid shouts and screams, I saw something that stopped me in my tracks. Across the street was the local grocer—a grumpy old man who didn't sell alcohol and didn't speak to marginals—sitting next to a transvestite with a long, black wig and mascara running down her cheeks. I watched the man open up a pack of cigarettes, his hands shaking, his face as white as a ghost, and offer one to her. That was, and still is, the image of that night that has stayed most entrenched in my mind: a conservative grocer and a crying transvestite smoking side by side. In the face of disaster and death, our mundane differences evaporated and we were all One, even if for only a few hours.

But I have always believed that stories, too, have a similar effect on us. I am not saying that fiction has the magnitude of an earthquake, but when we are inside a good novel we leave our cozy, small apartments behind and, through fictional characters, find ourselves getting to know people we had never met before, and perhaps had even disliked as our Others.

Years later I would recall that night in a completely different context: After the birth of my first child I experienced a strong depression

that separated me from the one passion in life that until then I had held above everything: writing fiction.

It was an emotional tremor for me. When I ran out of the building of the Self that I had carefully constructed all those years, there in the darkness, scared and shaken, I encountered a group of Thumbelinas—six tiny finger-women, each of whom looked like a different version of me—sitting side by side. I knew four of them already. The two others I was meeting for the first time. I understood that if it weren't for the extraordinary situation of my postpartum depression, I would have never seen them in a new light, and they would have kept living in my body and soul without ever listening to one another, like neighbors who share the same air but never a peaceful greeting.

Perhaps all women live with a mini harem inside and the discrepancy, tension and hard-achieved harmony among our conflicting selves is what really makes us ourselves.

It took me a while to get to know and love all of the six Thumbelinas.

This book is the story of how I faced my inner diversity and then learned to be One.

I am a writer.

I am a nomad.

I am a cosmopolite.

I am a lover of Sufism.

I am a pacifist.

I am a vegetarian and I am a woman, more or less in that order.

That is how I would have defined myself until I reached the age of thirty-five.

Up to that moment, first and foremost I saw myself as a teller of tales. Once upon a time, people like me shared their stories around a campfire, under a sky so wide you could never be sure where it ended, if it ever did. In Paris, they scraped together the rent by writing for newspapers. In the palace of a despotic sultan each story earned them the right to live one more day. Be it the Anonymous Narrator, Balzac

or the beautiful Shehrazat, I felt connected to those storytellers of old. The truth is, like many other novelists, I felt closer to dead writers than to contemporary ones, and perhaps related more easily to imaginary people than to those who were real—well, too real.

That was how I lived. That was how I planned to go on living. But then something totally unexpected, miraculous and bewildering happened to me: motherhood.

It changed everything, changed *me*.

I blinked at my new role, as baffled as a bat wakened by sunlight.

The day I learned I was pregnant the writer in me panicked, the woman in me became happily confused, the pacifist in me remained passive, the cosmopolite in me began to think of international baby names, the Sufi in me welcomed the news, the vegetarian in me worried about having to have to eat meat and the nomad in me just wanted to take to her heels and run as fast as she could. But that is what happens when you are pregnant. You can run away from everything and everyone but not from the changes in your body.

When the postpartum depression hit, it caught me completely unguarded. Stretching out in front of me like a dark tunnel that seemed to have no end, it scared me out of my wits. As I tried to cross through it, I fell down several times and my personality was shattered into pieces so small there was no way I could glue them back together again. Yet, at the same time, the experience helped me to look within and meet anew every member of the mini harem I had carried inside of me all those years. A depression can be a golden opportunity given to us by life to face head-on issues that matter greatly to our hearts, but which, out of haste or ignorance, have been swept under the carpet.

I am not sure what came first and what followed. Did I exit from my depression and then start writing this book? Or did I complete the book and in that way manage to crawl out of the tunnel? The truth is, I cannot tell. My memories of those days are vivid and intense, but they are far from being chronological.

I do know for certain, however, that this book was written with black milk and white ink—a cocktail of storytelling, motherhood,

wanderlust and depression, distilled for several months at room temperature.

Every book is a journey, a map into the complexities of the human mind and soul. This one is no different. Every reader therefore is a traveler of a sort. Some tours introduce one to cultural heritage sites, while others focus on outdoor adventures and wildlife. In the pages that follow, I want to take you on two tours at the same time, one into the Valley of Babies, the other into the Forest of Books.

In the Valley of Babies, I will invite you to take a closer look at the many roles that make up our lives, starting with womanhood, motherhood and authorship. In the Forest of Books, I will discuss the lives and works of various women writers, past and present, East and West, to see how they have dealt with similar topics, successfully or unsuccessfully.

This book was written not only for women who may have shared, or will share, a similar depression but also for anyone—man or woman, single or married, parent or childless, writer or reader—who finds it difficult, at times, to balance the multiplicity of roles and responsibilities in their lives.

The Sufis believe that every human being is a mirror that reflects the universe at large. They say each of us is a walking microcosm. To be human, therefore, means to live with an orchestra of conflicting voices and mixed emotions. This could be a rewarding and enriching experience were we not inclined to praise some members of that inner orchestra at the expense of others. We suppress many aspects of our personalities in order to conform to the perfect image we try to live up to. In this way, there is rarely—if ever—a democracy inside of us, but instead a solid oligarchy where some voices reign over the rest.

Black Milk is an attempt to topple that oligarchy through peaceful means, to move forward into a full-fledged, healthy inner democracy. While it would be naïve to assume that a democratic regime is a bed of roses, it is still preferable to any kind of despotism. Only when we

can harmonize and synchronize the voices within can we become better mothers, better fathers and yes, probably better writers.

But I am getting ahead of myself here and I shouldn't. I need to do a U-turn and go back in time, and look for the moment when everything started.

Black Milk

Lucky Dishwasher

There we were, my mother and I, caught in a bittersweet maze of feelings that only mothers and daughters are capable of getting caught in. But my heart was full of gratitude for the way she had responded to the sudden news and I thanked her for being so supportive.

"Oh, I am not being supportive at all, honey. I am just like a poor dishwasher who by chance finds a lottery ticket on the sidewalk and learns that he won the jackpot."

As accustomed to my mother's codes and ciphers as I am, I didn't get this one right away. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"But it is so clear, sweetheart. You feared I would be upset when I heard you secretly got married in another country, and when you saw I wasn't upset in the slightest, you felt grateful. Is that right?"

I nodded. "Right."

"You see, only a mother who is certain that her daughter will get married someday would be disappointed upon learning that she has done it without notice. Frankly, I never had any expectations of you in that regard. It seemed like you would be the last person on earth to get hitched. So I didn't go and buy a lottery ticket every week and pin my hopes on it. Does that make sense?"

It was beginning to.

Happy to have my full attention, my mother continued enthusiastically. "So I accepted the situation as it was and went on with my life. Then one day out of the blue I found this ticket on the sidewalk and

learned that I had won the lottery. That is how I felt when I heard the news of your nuptials, as astounded as a lucky dishwasher!"

I had recently gotten married in Berlin. It was no coincidence that we had chosen this city to tie the knot because our marriage, at least to us, seemed no less surprising than the unexpected reunification of Germany. Like East and West Berlin, we, too, had been together once, then separated, and were now getting back together. My husband and I also had—and still have—personalities as different as capitalism and communism. Eyup is a gentle and generous soul, an always-rational man bestowed with an amazing inner balance and the patience of the prophet Job, from whom he got his name. As for me, I would have to tick off pretty much everything opposite from his qualities, starting with "impatient," "impulsive," "irrational," "emotional" and "walking chaos."

We refrained from having a wedding as neither of us was fond of ceremonies. So we simply walked into the Turkish Embassy on Kbaum Avenue and announced our intention to get married. There was a homeless man sitting on a bench next to the entrance, his head full of lice and thoughts, his face turned up to the sky, happily basking under the sun. I thought he would make a perfect witness but when I tried to ask him if he would come inside with us, he spoke no English, I spoke no German, and the sign language we invented there and then was not creative enough to cover a subject this unusual. Instead we offered him a pack of Marlboro Lights, and in return he seemed to bless us with a toothless smile. He also gave us a shiny golden chocolate wrapper that he had carefully smoothed out. I accepted the gift with delight. It seemed like a good omen.

I didn't wear a wedding gown not only because of my distaste for such a ritual but also because I don't ever wear white. I have always had a hard time understanding how other people can. For years I could not even sit on a couch if it was too white, but I was gradually cured of this habit. My friends have several theories as to why I don't like white. They think I might have fallen into a cauldron of rice pudding when I was a baby (unlike Obelix falling into the Magic Potion, this

gave me no supernatural powers) and ended up hating the color, but not the pudding. However, I have no such recollection, and their second theory about me being biased against doctors, dentists or lab technicians—people who wear white—isn't true either.

In any case, on that day in May, I adorned myself in my preferred color of choice: black. As for Eyup, he wore dark pants and a white shirt, to honor tradition to some extent. That is how we said "I do." Without fuss and on a whim. Although Eyup's parents and five sisters, and my mother and grandmother, would have loved it had we had a typical Turkish wedding with food, dance and music, when they found out that we had gotten married, they were kind enough to respect the way we chose to go about it.

Lucky dishwashers aside, my mother wasn't the only one who didn't expect me to get married. Apparently neither did my readers. As followers of my novels and essays, they had always been the first to understand what I felt. But this time they showed more shock than understanding. In letters, e-mails and postcards they expressed their surprise. Some even sent me clips of my earlier interviews where I had said, "Domestic bourgeois life? Forget it! It doesn't suit me," and, "I don't think raising kids is my thing, but I believe I could make a good stepmother someday. You know, someone you can easily take to a football game or to a prom dress rehearsal." Now, with a "gotcha" moment in their eyes, those smart readers with wry humor demanded to know what had changed.

There was only one answer I could give them: love.

I love my husband and always feel a strange calmness and happiness descend upon me when I am next to him. Yet there was a part of me that didn't know how to deal with such tranquillity and wouldn't or just couldn't settle down into wedded bliss. Perhaps it was because I couldn't settle down anywhere for too long. Having been born in Strasbourg, raised in Madrid, and resided in Ankara, Istanbul, Amman, Cologne, Boston, Michigan and Arizona, I had been living out of a suitcase all my life—certain that I could stay anywhere and everywhere

on this planet as long as I didn't have to put down roots. As the only child of a single mother, I had accepted one truth about human nature early on that I saw others trying to resist in vain: that loneliness was an inseparable part of being human.

I liked loneliness. I cherished it. I knew people who would go nuts if they were alone for too many hours. It was the opposite with me. I would go nuts if I had to be in the company of other people all the time. I would miss my privacy.

My vocation as a novelist thrives upon solitude. In almost all areas of art one has to work with other people during the creative process. Even the most egotistical of film directors has to be good at harmonizing his energy with that of others, learning to function as a team. So, too, fashion designers, actors, dancers, playwrights, singers and musicians.

But not fiction writers. For weeks, months and sometimes years on end, we retreat into the novels we write; we stay inside that imaginary cocoon surrounded by imaginary characters, writing destinies, thinking we are God. As we develop plots, add sudden twists, create and destroy characters, we can easily end up presuming we are the center of the world. Self-absorption and an inflated ego are the two most harmful side effects of our profession. That is why we make poor lovers and even poorer wives and husbands. Writers are primarily asocial creatures—though we can easily forget that with a bit of fame and success. The novel is the loneliest form of art, as Walter Benjamin once said.

During the period after my wedding I was teaching in Arizona and every few weeks I would hop on a plane for a twenty-six-hour flight (with connections) to be with my husband and friends back in the crazy, chaotic, colorful rhythm of Istanbul, and then I would return to Arizona to retreat into my desert solitude.

The first thing you feel when you walk out of Tucson International Airport is the heat wave, rising from the depths of the earth, licking your face with invisible flames. The first thing you feel when you walk out of Ataturk International Airport in Istanbul is the wave of noise, a