

INTIMATE SUBVERSIONS
REVIEWS OF WOMEN'S POETRY FROM ARGENTINA:
BECCIÚ, KAMENSZAIN, PIZARNIK & PONSOWY

Night Watch, **Ana Becció**, dual language edition. £10 ISBN 978-1-906742-26-3

Men and Women Alone, **Tamara Kamenzain**, dual language edition. £9 ISBN 978-1-906742-27-0

Selected Poems, **Alejandra Pizarnik**. £15 ISBN 978-1-906742-24-9

All three collections **tr. Cecilia Rossi**;

Enemies Outside, **Mori Ponsowy tr. Mori Ponsowy and Naomi Foyle**, dual language edition. £10
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Ana Becció



Tamara Kamenzain



Alejandra Pizarnik



Mori Ponsowy

Mention Argentine poetry and people think Borges. Less well-known are Argentina's significant and often iconoclastic women poets. What a treat then to read four women poets in this series. For all of them, despite their different voices, a central theme is women's fractured, conflicted sense of self along with a questioning of our relationship to language. Self-expression is never just taken for granted – sometimes sheer necessity, other times a trap. Even in the most oblique poems there is a boldness I found totally refreshing.

Most influential of the four has been Alejandra Pizarnik. Born into a Russian Jewish family in 1936 she spent most of short her life in Buenos Aires and died aged thirty-six. Mexican poet Octavio Paz said of her work: '[it] produces bright heat, capable of burning, melting and even vaporising the sceptical'. This volume spans work from 1956 to 1972, including her remarkably short poems and later prose poems. Speech and silence waver precariously as does her own divided identity – consumed from within by life rather than its consumer: "I have been pure offering / pure she-wolf / roaming in woods / on the night of bodies // to speak the innocent word" (*Works and Nights*). Language has an almost magical potency with which Pizarnik creates gardens, dwellings for her lost selves, her "little paper dolls" that are "indistinguishable from the ground", their screams unheard. (*Night Shared in the Memory of A Flight*). Unable to define her own boundaries it is as if the poet's existence balances on the boundary itself as in *The Truth about this Old Wall*. Like the wind she "delivers ingenious speeches / in honour of lilacs" (*Childhood*) – her writing flying in the face of loss and death:

And in spite of the green fog on her lips and the grey cold in her eyes, her
 voice corrodes the distance opening between thirst and the hand in search
 of a glass. She sings.

(Nocturnal Singer)

In award-winning translator and poet Cecilia Rossi's beautiful translations these are poems that continue to burn in the imagination long after you have read them.

Locating itself within a Gnostic tradition of passionate lyricism and epiphany, Becció's prose poem is a meditation on absence and aloneness. Yet it is so charged with love and yearning that it makes an exhilarating read. Mysterious, disorienting at first, you discover different levels of a story that refuses to be a story, the song which 'I' will not sing, a self, like Pizarnik's, divided. With pronouns being personae, 'where' becomes its own kingdom, an absolute place where love reigns, which – with *song* – the author endeavours to keep from dying. The landscape you stumble into is interior, sparsely drawn, made of sand and stone, containing wide green trees, rare, startling animals, the black coral of absence against whose reefs the soul breaks. Here with her "gazelle" gone, the "I" – without the beloved's gaze to make it whole – splinters, bereft.

But Becció's poetic project is wholly more ambitious than charting love's loss. It stems from her distrust of language – patriarchal, distancing language which ruptures and appropriates the fleetingly fragile nature of experience. Language wraps young women in words, dressing them for their place in society. It "hunts" mothers separating them from their daughters, leaving them to the "world's rancour", the inadequacy of the "poor world-father". Only the body is to be trusted: "The mouth makes love, with the mouth love is said." The poet's task is to "steal *their* words back". She does so with exquisite passion, her poetry "like these pages waiting for someone to write them, sure of their intimate subversion."

For Kamenzain – "A squatter in my own house / since ownership walked out on me" – the starting point is women's alienation from themselves. Even objects turn on her. Hers is a more urban landscape, where single men and women seek – or flee – closeness, "all alone". Again, as for Becció, only the body is trustworthy "the nape of his neck sees me", though sometimes not even sex brings comfort "when nobody I mean no-body /, not even he sweating against my shoulder / has my telephone number".

Kamenzain's short poems are almost brusque, hard-hitting. She builds a powerful central sequence of poems which begin "when I see you for the first time" always pushing the metaphor of a blind-date further. The couple search each other's eyes for recognition; the poet examines what life itself has to offer. Ghosts of exes are invoked, expectations thwarted before they reach "an animal happiness in our four-leggedness". The final long poem *The Binding* explores contemporary contradictions of marriage through images of the Jewish wedding and the older generation's hopes, as they "drew a new roof on nothing". Ultimately "strangeness is to be lived in" and refuge is found in words that shelter like "another little tent raised in the desert".

Women's relationship to language is again explored in Ponsow's collection translated by the author and accomplished British/Canadian poet Naomi Foyle. In Ponsow's *Paradise* the bird – foolishly governed by instinct – "flies / in spite of itself. It doesn't decide / to sing when it sings". Ponsow however keeps trying to piece together her *Jigsaw Puzzle*. Sometimes a proliferation of meanings threatens to overwhelm her "like cancer cells". Other times multiplying DNA cells produce patterns to be celebrated. Though displacing her own "soul's spotlights" they give her back her missing partner through their child's resemblance to his father. The poet watches a football match to see "if there's anything the players can do to change / results written at the beginning of Time / in the inevitable language of physics" (*Electromagnetism*).

Her search deepens, but truth resides in language's ability to name and again also in the body, "Maybe skin won't fool you." (*No Peeking*) Throughout, her gaze is unflinching: "I remember as a kid / tearing apart a cape sparrow's nest"; confrontational (*Prozac*), playfully questioning (*Night Noises*).

Motherhood, while not white-washed, offers grounding. Though the book ends on a wistful, uncertain note, poems such as her title poem or *Unfit for Life* are an affirmation of connection.

Maria Jastrzębska

Issue 9 will feature Maria Jastrzębska's interview with Argentinean poet, Ana Becció