

Katrina Borowicz's Rosetta
(Ex Ophidia Press, 2020)

Reviewed by Gregory J. Wolos

I AM MOVED BY THE QUIET AMBITION OF THE POEMS COLLECTED BY KATRINA BOROWICZ in her prize-winning collection *Rosetta*—“moved” in that I find myself unsettled as I surrender myself to the poet’s skillful yet quiet manipulation of time and perspective. It is the poet’s eye that controls what we see—what details are chosen to be placed under a magnifying glass and enhanced for the reader’s attention. Without the poet, how would we know what to see? Without the poet, how would we know how to think about what we see? Subtly, almost imperceptibly, Borowicz constructs a tableau, situates the reader’s focus, and then expounds on the value of the experience she has created.



In the poem “Moment,” Borowicz seems to be validating the poet’s license to be an interpreter of experience for the reader: “I was there/ at just the right time./ That is my/ life, showing up/ at the moment/ others don’t. Maybe/ that moment/ was meant for me/ maybe it even/ waited. Maybe it was/ nothing but/ the silk of chance/ roaring/ in a sudden wind/ And I/ alone/ was there.” Borowicz, in “From the Deck” draws our attention to what we she is privileged to see, yet also exercises her own judgment on how much we are allowed to experience from what she has chosen to reveal: “Perhaps it means/ nothing/ the constant/ gesturing of the sea:/ look over here, here/ I am — / a small swell/ I like to think only I/ see suddenly flatten/ because what was/ almost there/ must never break/ the surface.” In “Caw,” the title of which reminds us of the “mood changing” crow in Robert Frost’s “Dust of Snow,” Borowicz again glorifies the role of the poet as one who has the ability and responsibility of articulating an experience as personal as a dream: “. . . who am I that can lie/ content in the fragile dawn, nerves in the ear/ purring, fingers curling and stretching/ like a pianist’s before the velvet curtain decides to part.”

When Borowicz contemplates the “frightening” and “inevitable” power of spring in the poem “Fingers,” as she experiences “so much movement suddenly pulling me along,” she does not lose sight of her role as poet-observer, the bestower and revealer of sensibility, concluding: “maybe I’ve willed it all.”

In Borowicz’s poems, discovery and revelation go hand and hand, and it is the poet that achieves both, as she expresses in “Circling”: “pen/ between fingers,/ How odd is that?/ The everyday / startles me/ with its baldness.” It is the poet-observer who draws connections over time, and thus controls our understanding of history: “A hand moved/ over paper long ago,/ forming the words/ Beauty/ is energy./ That perfect circle/ has

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no beginning/ just the discovery/ of being said." Borowitz as poet teaches her readers how to connect to their own pasts by illustrating her connection to her own, as in her poem "The Old Country": "There was another country,/ always spoken of with reverence./ I didn't understand/ why we'd left,/ I didn't yet/ understand the saw blade of history." It is through the imagination that, as in a fairy tale, a connection to the past is forged: "Our fireplace was where/ the stories were read/ from a burning book:/ molten logs, lit from within./ See the shadow of a man/ in there. See a terrifying/ creature with wings./ See it all fall down."

Yet it is not only history that the poet frames through imaginative "storying;" it is also the poet who extracts meaning from the cacophonous present, as Borowitz suggests in "Rosetta," (the title an allusion to the Rosetta stone, which has been used as a key to interpret ancient languages): "It's like listening/ to three different songs/ at once—/ if you hear all/ of them, you hear/ none of them." Though we may "[l]ie in bed,/ thankful/ for your blanket/ . . . / Vaguely warm in the beat/ of your own/ private blood," we are aware of events occurring outside of ourselves, such as the comet that "is making a terrible/ noise somewhere,/ everywhere." Yet if the world is full of such "terrible noise," how do we dare leave the security of our bed and blanket to enter the fray? In "Truce," Borowitz suggests that, despite the cacophony, we share common forms of experience: "For everyone who steps on the bus/ what fear and disappointment comes on/ what tenderness what memories of childhood nightmares/ and family gatherings what secrets are bundled up/ in our arms fallen into a shallow sleep." On the bus—i.e., the world we share, we agree, the poet tells us, to maintain a truce: "a truce exists among us/ an uneasy silence/ ancient silence the native realm/ of strangers and dreamers."

Borowitz's poems return again and again to her contemplation of her role as poet—to act as a filter through which the incomprehensibility of a too-vast world can be limited and described. In "Tiny" she suggests that the process, for her, is challenging, yet physical: "My voice not even a momentary quiver/ in a great sea of silence./ . . . / Yet there are times/ I feel my body—heart/ beating, hands at work—/ is a passage, an opening/ the size of a needle's eye/ but big enough to let it all/ pass through." Borowitz as poet, she believes, possesses a kind of objective vision that allows her to see what is not readily available to others. She describes, in the poem "Escape," her "true habitat": "the not here,/ that maybe island/ at the other end of a long gaze." Her poetic sensibility, "a part of me with no name/ wanders far from the I whose cold hands/ are in her pockets," enabling her to make sense of what others do not or cannot see, such as a metaphorical ship that "is out there/ going about its slow-motion business,/ neither arriving nor departing./ The lives on board invisible as insects in winter."

The clockman of Borowitz's eponymous poem seeks to understand the mechanism of time: "I'll find out what the matter is,/ he says." The narrator-poet marvels at his ability to focus in spite of the chaos of the outer world, yet it is a concentration that parallels the efforts of the poet: "I wonder how he can think/ in that room filled with footsteps—/ some delicate as a cat's/ others empty suits of armor/ marching in circles." It is the clockman's questions that focus his investigation and that will provide him with the answer he seeks. In such a way the poet makes her choices,

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which define and limit her own investigation—though she remains aware that she is drawing these limits in a world that contains infinite possible sets of questions and answers. She is unlike the clockman's parrot which sees only the world of the shop: "From its perch it can't see / the huge flock of blackbirds/ mobbing the backyard feeder." Wallace Stevens may give us "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," Borowitz seems to be telling the reader, but thirteen is far less than infinity, and the poet's job in any single poem is to depend on her own vision to give the reader one way of making sense of the world.