From Exchanging Lives

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Abstract
Translating is a form of meeting, it is an encounter between writers. I met Alejandra Pizarnik a few years ago, in Colombia when a friend gave me a pirate edition of some of her poems and it was love at first reading. I never had the chance to meet her in person. She died, tragically young at the age of only 36 in 1972, the year my eldest daughter was born.
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Her poetry was completely different to mine. She wrote tiny pieces, prose poems, carefully crafted and full of strange surreal images, with echoes of her Eastern European ancestry and her Latin American present. I was writing poems as solid blocks of words, drawing upon a very Anglo-Saxon realist tradition of writing. She wrote about herself as an abandoned child, a creature in a fairy tale. She was Goldilocks, Snow White, Little Red Riding Hood afraid of the wolf, lost in the wood. I was writing about myself as a mother, as Clytemnestra, as Snow White’s stepmother, knocking wolves on the head, putting my apron on to serve wolf stew to my demanding family. She was adrift in unending space. I was trapped in a house without a room of my own.

Her fantasies were of blood and knives. Mine were of secret sexual encounters and having the strength to break through bars with my bare hands. We shared our dreams of violence, just as we shared our sense of homelessness, of not-belonging. She found herself in Argentina, a Latin American with a lost Jewish European past. I found myself in England, an Englishwoman with a lost Mediterranean childhood, an insider and yet an outsider simultaneously, standing on the threshold between cultures: the ideal place for a translator, who occupies the liminal space that others step over without a passing thought.

Alejandra Pizarnik died, like Sylvia Plath, by her own hand, and like Plath she died before she could know much about feminism and solidarity between women. Yet her writing prefigures feminist concerns, and her poems have an immediacy that does not go out of date. She wrote about the dangers and terrors of being the woman she was, and in her way she also celebrated her state.

I started to translate her work because it was a way of getting closer to her, of finding out more about her. Then, I came to see that the act of translating was changing my own writing. I became braver, I tried new forms, experimented with different voices. We were and are, utterly different as writers and as women. She succumbed to the lures of silence, I go on killing wolves and making wolf-skin coats for my increasing family. Maybe, if we had met face to face we would have had nothing in common with one another. But I feel a great sense of closeness to her. I know her. She knows me. We have shared something. Through translation.