Reader's Companion

for

ROSETTA

by Karina Borowicz

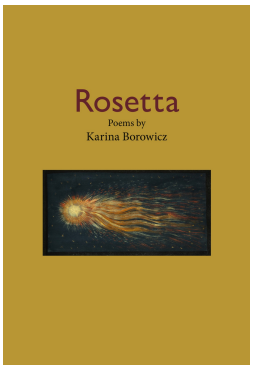
(Ex Ophidia Press, 2021)

Winner of the Ex Ophidia Prize

Contents

Introduction and Critical Praise

In reflections on escape, displacement, and identity, an award-winning poet shows that our longing to understand where we come from is as strong as our desire to know where we're headed.



"Borowicz captures that intangible but rich feeling of inheriting a world and words that are beyond anything we can directly experience."

—Nick Ripatrazone, *The Millions*

"The poems of *Rosetta* by Karina Borowicz are composed in a rhetoric stripped to the essential and uttered with the disquieting and insistent familiarity of a recurring dream. It is from that compression that the poems derive their strength, and it is that tonal authority that the reader ultimately trusts to navigate the poems' dark and glittering waters. The poetry here is unlike any other. Borowicz is a master of startling insight and control. *Rosetta* is a remarkable book."

—David Sanders, author of *Compass and Clock*

"Karina Borowcz's *Rosetta* is an aptly named collection of poems since it speaks in three languages at once: metaphor, music, and magic. It begins with a searing poem in three points of view—refugee parents, a child, and that child as an adult—all severed from 'The Old Country' by 'the saw blade of history.' … Borowicz's collection is a brilliant 'burning book' of poems so vivid and moving that the reader is drawn from one page to the next by the urgency of a poet who knows that 'if something is going / to happen /it happens.'"

—Sharon Cumberland, author of *Strange with Age*

Questions for Discussion

General

1. What might the book's title, and the title poem, "Rosetta," say about the collection as a whole?

2. What recurring themes, images, or metaphors do you notice?

3. Can you find any threads that connect the various sections of the book?

4. Many aspects of the natural world appear throughout the book: the elements and seasons, flora and fauna, natural history artifacts and scientific discovery. What are the relationships between the human world and the natural world? How are encounters between the two experienced and described? Point to specific instances in the text.

Point of View

5. Examine the point of view of several poems. Is it first person, third person, or something else? What can you say about the poem's speaker?

6. Elsewhere, the poet has cited Robert Bly's quote that many poems have a "troubled speaker" (see "Writings on Craft" for more information). Look at several poems from *Rosetta* with this in mind. Can you describe what might be troubling the poem's speaker? Cite specific examples, using words, lines, and images from the poems.

Place

7. Is the concept of place used (in any of the poems, sections, or the collection as a whole) to ground the work or inform it in any way? If so, what are those places, how are they described, and how do they inform the work? Cite specific examples from the text.

Craft

8. The term "volta" defines the turn or transition that can occur in a poem (traditionally a sonnet) toward the end, and which can act to clarify or complicate what has come before. One of the sections and one of the poems in *Rosetta* is named "Volta." Can you find any instances of such a shift, or volta, in a poem from this section of the book?

Ideas for Writing

1. Read the ekphrastic poem "Vermeer's *Lacemaker*" (p. 27). In addition, read the poet's thoughts on writing ekphrastic poetry, included in the "Writings on Craft" section of this Reader's Companion. Using some of the techniques described, write an ekphrastic poem based on a work of visual art.

2. Several of the poems in this collection draw on news items, for example "Her Last Free Dive" (p. 21), "Last of Her Kind" (p. 42), and "Attack" (p. 43). Browse the news, magazine articles, or historical newspaper archives for an idea or even just a title to spark a poem.

3. Research the use of the volta in poetry, from its traditional role in the sonnet to its more contemporary use. You might want to find some examples of contemporary sonnets, such as those by Patricia Smith or Gerald Stern. See if you can incorporate this idea of a turn or transformation into one of your own poems, either newly-written for this exercise or a previous one that needs revising.

Author Q & A

How did you come up with the title for your new book, *Rosetta*?

It's from a poem in the collection about the spacecraft *Rosetta*, which was built to land on a comet and collect data. I found the idea of trying to land on a moving comet compelling. There's a certain amount of hubris involved, but it's also emblematic of human curiosity and creativity. The poem is meant to invoke the Rosetta Stone, too, another emblem of curiosity and creativity. But it's mostly about what it's like to be a human being alive in a world full of both wonder and horror. And I think that pins down most of the poems in this collection pretty well.

Do you have a favorite poem from your new collection?

I've spent a lot of time with them all, nurturing and polishing, so it's hard to choose a favorite. "The Old Country" and "Volta" are special to me; "September Tomatoes," is too, and it has received a lot of love from folks online, which even led to a volume of selected works translated into French, *Tomates de septembre*.

Tell us a little about yourself. How do the facts of your biography inform your work?

I grew up in a community of immigrants that was filled with old world nostalgia. Because of this, I was drawn to the study of history and languages, and I'm fascinated by the ideas of time and place. In addition, for most of my adult life I've worked with newcomers to the United States, teaching English to immigrants and helping refugees adjust to their new home.

Where do you find inspiration for your poems?

Everywhere: lived experience, what I witness, close observation of the natural world, stories I've heard, the daily news, dream fragments, obsessions.

What are some of your obsessions?

I'm obsessed with time: the idea of it; the different cultural and historical takes on it; the way we experience it, measure it, and mark its passage; the notion of time travel and the braiding together of past, present, and future in our lives; and how writers and other artists express the passage of time in their work. Although that may all sound abstract, I'm quite interested in how time is manifested in a very real way in our day to day lives and surroundings. As for other obsessions — well, there's food. I worked as a cook throughout my college years and beyond and seriously considered becoming a professional chef. These days I'm happy to read cookbooks like novels and dream up my own recipes.

How did you get started writing poetry?

I loved reading poetry from a young age, and I was lucky to have a father who loved poetry and stocked it on his bookshelves. That was what first drew me in. In high school I started getting serious about it, reading more widely beyond my parents' shelves, reading for discovery, reading to learn what makes a poem tick. A pivotal moment was when I took part in a summer poetry writing program for high school students at Bard College, mentored by the poets Robert Kelly, John Yau, and Peter Sears.

What other poets have influenced your work?

There are more than I can name, and I'm discovering new voices that I learn from all the time. But some formative ones that spring to mind are Emily Dickinson, Charles Simic, Jean Follain, Yannis Ritsos, and Anna Kamienska. I love poets who are seekers, who value precision, and who have an eye for just the right detail.

Do you enjoy giving poetry readings? What do you think is the difference between reading a poem on the page versus hearing it?

I know some poets get anxious when reading their work in front of an audience. We didn't necessarily sign up to be performers, and poetry is created in solitude. But I think it's a disservice to poetry and to lovers of poetry to keep it only on the page. It's true that the main way of consuming published poetry is reading it in books and journals. But I hate to think of poetry as mute text. When I write it, when I read it — I hear it, and I speak it. And how great is it to hear a poem in the poet's own voice, in person, with all the personal tics, the accent, the pauses, and the creation stories.

What's the best advice you ever got about writing poetry?

To be successful, art should have both action and contrast. And this — read, read poetry from the past and present; know the history; and read poets from other cultures and from around the world.

Writings on Craft

Excerpts from the author's blog, "Hook, Line, and Stanza," found at karinaborowicz.com

The Troubled Speaker

I keep coming back to a statement by Robert Bly that "every poem has to have images and ideas and some sort of troubled speaker" (*Turkish Pears in August*). The notion of a troubled speaker captured my attention right away. It gets at two very essential questions about poetry: for the poet, why one is writing a poem in the first place, and for the reader, why one should even care.

"Troubled speaker" means someone bothered by something, trying to work something out. And all of us are daily engaged in working things out – it's what makes us human. But it is the artist's job to give voice to this process, to acknowledge the uneasiness, the doubt, the fear, the awe, the surprise, the difficulty, the dizziness, the contradiction that is at the heart of the human experience.

It's a useful question to ask of any poem: what's bothering the poem's speaker? To pinpoint the unease is one way of unlocking a poem. I have found it very helpful to conceive of poems this way — as a seeking after, as a search. And I am coming to learn that a poem without this energy goes nowhere.

Ekphrasis

When writing an ekphrastic poem, it's never enough to simply describe a scene; one must inhabit it. And to inhabit a scene is to be there as a living being who is a creature in and of time, not removed from time, not observing from the cool distance of timelessness.

It's true, however, that a picture is time stopped, a moment removed from all the other moments flowing before and, especially, after it. The way scientists remove a core sample from the earth in order to run tests in the lab, the painter or photographer has taken a core sample of time, the better to meditate on a particular moment. In so doing, one hope is that from the particular we may experience some larger truth.

The Lacemaker by Vermeer

An engaged viewer returns a picture to time's animation. The poet who uses a work of art as a starting point is doing just this. And what it means is the picture is allowed to live, allowed all the gifts of time: action and transformation chief among them. Shadows lengthen. Icarus

disappears into the sea without a trace, and the water's surface is seamless again. The girl making lace feels a sudden rush of rebellion in her fingers.

Energy

A good poem generates energy, or better yet, is energy. What does this mean? That there's action and contrast. Movement. Transformation. To better understand, ponder the opposite: stasis, inertia. Passivity and monotony.

To make an image or idea dynamic means to give it something to spark against, to put it into contact with something else. You could try banging a flint against empty space, but nothing will come of it. Take a poem you love and examine how the sparks are created. Do the images and ideas interact, bang into each other like excited atoms, or are they suspended in a sterile environment, cool and aloof?

I try to keep thinking about energy not only during the writing process but also (and perhaps especially) during revision. Having images and ideas already on paper to work with – to rearrange, expand upon, cut, simplify, complicate, connect – makes the job of activation easier.