

Translator's note: Dablia Ravikovitch and Yona Wallach are better known in translation, but Miri Ben Simhon is an important and until now missing piece in the English language picture of 20th century Israeli women's poetry. Like them, Ben Simhon, with her marked interest in ars poetica, was acutely aware of the way gender shapes poetry. And she often wrote about sex. —LK

The pursuit of desire

Several nights have expanded
as wide as a double bed now
but I don't want to wake lofty notions out of their deep sleep
by tossing and moaning.
Meanwhile, among the other things I'm naturally doing
I happen upon
only those whose glance is tormented
with the expectation of love.
I never ignore this look
and I've learned that other people
are like this too, when they touch.
What the eyes strongly desire
and grasp without nostalgia
is embarrassing, one could almost cry.

Not from here

In order to examine
the small jewels of attention
they showered upon her
it seems she had to really disassociate herself
from herself
and observe.

Which made possible the involvement, if slight,
of minor mental gestures
that were destined to be denied, and to smudge.
In a foreign city she wasn't allowed to indulge
in nuances.

And it was as if she were blocked from the sharp angles of emotion (what's this?)
it was some need to look experienced
and answer precisely
(again she couldn't hide behind a remaining bit of youthfulness,
 although she looked young)

she was very careful about her facial expressions
and manners.

The language wasn't her mother tongue
and she lacked words – Ah if only she could speak fluently.

Only once she burst out laughing:

“But how do you know?” she exclaimed and looked him straight in the eye
then turned away, embarrassed.

The gramophone played a different music, sparkling, captivating
there was sweat on her temples and her crotch was wet,
for a moment it seemed that the room too
planned to sink.

The territory is all his

he didn't seem to take that into account
his all-seeing eyes glanced at her smiling,
sober. He sensed the clarity hidden behind her stern expression,
perhaps her eyes, like small mirrors, gave her away.

After a short time he needed her like whisky,
ended the secret search to become acquainted with her fibrous feminine
spinal cord, its slim curves.

Now he takes a break from speaking like a demagogue
lingering over his impressions of her.

Small surprises emerge unexpectedly on her face,
laughter too.

“Elegant and distant” he thought,

“A different kind of chauvinist” she thought,

later they'll recount lovemaking in his bed

on purple flannel sheets

and pathways all the way down her body will be found
transporting burning pleasure to her toes

and he did fasten his mouth to hers, as she to him, gathering
all his sighs into one controlled masculine moan,
biting his lips not to faint from her perfume, the scent of her nakedness.
She joined her body to him. Her nerves nursed
by his and nursing.

And outside, a cold European city, on its streets
white snow immaculate as children,
ended its nightly act
in a swoon at the expectation of more.

Post factum

You lie on my body now, limp,
our thirst slaked,
your breath moves over my face,
a mix of cigarettes and the scent of pine
soon you'll ask "how was it"
that wonderful question for the other.
"This is how we are" you told me once out of nowhere,
"Having sex and wanting to know how we did."
I consider the masculinity hidden in a statement
of this type. Something of penetration wafts
with each move of your body, your head atilt
to light a cigarette, you inhale smoke
and exhale from your nostrils.
"Oh your sexy vagina," you say,
still in a stupor, how sensuously
you suck and soak up every twitch of a nerve, every quiver,
absorb it into your your wondrous body that feels, transports
desires to travel, to soar, to know, oh to know,
to love.

Thirst

For some time you've been reading my thoughts
according to the gleam in my eye and tone of voice
and give suitable replies to my fears
a cheap maneuver
and I
having spent a long time in the nervous arousal
of red hot distress
I suddenly understand, as if enlightened,
or my love has simply come
to a dead end.

Translated from the Hebrew by Lisa Katz