

Mouth to mouth

Radmila Lazić, *A Wake for the Living*, translated and with an introduction
by Charles Simic, Bloodaxe, £8.95, ISBN 1852246596

At first glance Radmila Lazić seems an unlikely candidate for translation by fellow-Serb Charles Simic, that anomalously Central European fabulist and ironist. *A Wake for the Living* introduces us to a predominantly first-person, violently confessional poetry of female experience, of sex and desire. In his Introduction, however, Simic offers her “uncommon eloquence ... words that strike home” as the key to Lazić’s work; and it’s plain this is the common ground. A blunt, ringing clarity at its best generates images so compelling they seem undeniable: “My skin is velvet on the inside, / Like iris . [...] / My body, so wintry a moment ago, / Is now a bush full of wild bees.”

Some of the poems collected here could certainly count among the strongest in contemporary Balkan writing. “From my ‘Kingdom’” is an *unheimlich* evocation of the landscape of solitude:

The history of solitude is long.
It’s made up of a string of individuals
That resemble each other like blades of grass [...].
I can turn and see the forest
Walking after me step by step
Like a sleepwalker in a dream.

Predictably, however, Lazić never allows such landscapes to over-grow her highly-charged processes of personification and sexualisation. In the subversive “Autumn Ode” she declares, “I’ll celebrate October and not May, / The striptease of trees instead of orgasm of blossoms”. (There’s a similar euphony in the original.) This is serious wit, often rising to exuberance: “I don’t want anyone to snore next to me / Like a choir of saws in a forest / While I drill the ceiling with my eyes all night long” (“The Bliss of Departure”). It deploys imagery with such ease that we don’t even notice the virtuoso doubling of metaphor: “I’m no longer the little chrysanthemum / For you to scratch your balls with” (“Lyric Consequences”). An analogous irony characterises two of the most successful pieces in the book, the virtual elegy of “There, Here” and the literally elegiac “Last Voyage: New York-Belgrade”, one of the few poems to situate itself in

a country
Whose citizens return
Like blind travellers
Without daydreams, without tears.
Like jars of hand cream
Or compacts in strangers' purses.

Lazić is indeed, as the book-cover proclaims, an activist: *Pro Femina*, the journal of which she was founding editor, does more than simply ensure that women writers and intellectuals get read in Serbia (problematic enough): it has changed the whole discursive landscape in Belgrade. She's also distinguished as part of the Belgrade Circle who, from the 1970s onwards, used scenes from urban life in a poetics of regime resistance. Lazić, who demonstrates in these poems the vivid complexity of her thinking, is nevertheless overwhelmingly represented here by pieces about the loss of love and need for sex. Among the best of these are the variegated splendours of the Freudian "A Woman's Letter": "With a belly up to my teeth, hands in the dough, / Face covered with flour, my heart a cinder / And his hand on my ass." Doubtless many readers can exclaim with recognition at passages like these; but the effect is sometimes repetitive, and there's just a whiff of the fashionable steering of a woman poet away from the Big Boys' table.

However, in this generously laid-out parallel-text edition, Bloodaxe once again introduce Anglophone readers to a new voice and, to some extent, a new poetics: we tend to know poets of the Serbian Banat (Vasko Popa, Ivan Lalić, Ioan Flora) better than the Belgrade Circle. This format also allows one to "read" both the extraordinary poets at work here, in a collection which destabilises and refreshes both language and experience. As Lazić declares (in "The Poems I Write"), "Words are embers. I burn myself into poetry."

FIONA SAMPSON

