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RINCÓN de TRADUCTORES

Three Poems by Alfonsina Storni: "Saturday", "You Want Me White", and "Her"

Alfonsina Storni

Translated by Silas Mullins *and* Alejandro López

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INTRODUCTION

Alfonsina Storni was a writer with progressive ideas trying to make her mark in a literary world that marginalized the contributions of women. She succeeded, to the extent that her poetry is as powerful today as it was a century ago when it was written. Storni threw into relief the hypocrisy of men's expectations of women, expectations that were taken for granted in her time and remain prevalent in today's society, in spite of the continuing struggle for gender equity, inclusivity, and social justice. Storni's progressiveness—anything but out-of-date—is imprinted in both the content and form of her poems, and that's one reason they have remained memorable.

There is an unrestrained sensuality in Storni's work that inhabits a panoply of forms—the flickering vivacity of a woman imprisoned by unresolved anticipation in "Saturday"; the tragic strength and alien beauty of the so-called 'fallen' woman in "Her"; the keenly sarcastic voice of the woman who effectively challenges the man to a duel in "You Want Me White." In the latter, one of Storni's best-loved poems, that sensuality is traced in traditionally feminine images of the natural world ("seafoam / mother-of-pearl") which Storni slyly embraces to subvert the double standards the woman is subject to. Sensuality also situates her scorn for the perpetrator of those double standards ("fruits and honeys / purpling your lips") and delineates the harsh landscape and conditions ("nourish your body / with bitter roots / drink from the rocks") of the world she banishes her suitor to.

Unlike the woman in "Saturday," who bathes blithely in a fountain, or the woman in "Her," who mesmerizes with her streetwise strut, the woman in "You Want Me White" is hidden in plain sight, and, subsuming the dichotomy of feminine/masculine forms, refuses to be defined by a man who cannot see all that she is. By locating the woman in the varieties of her misapprehension—acknowledging how the man's world has kept her waiting, made her an object, and demanded a purity and perfection it was not able or willing to offer

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itself—Storni creates a "unified feminine subject,"[1] and a body of work far more nuanced and empowering than certain highly regarded critics have given her credit for.

As she appropriates the male gaze, Storni exorcises it. In "You Want Me White" she ventriloquizes the man's stereotype of a woman's requisite "purity" in order to disassemble it. In "Her," she pivots vocally, after the volta, from admiration for the woman's irresistible strength to compassion for her helplessness in a world built on exploitation. And in "Saturday," embodying the woman kept waiting, she dramatizes the unrequited preparation unnoticed by her paramour, who is almost certain to let her down again, not unlike the male-dominated literary world she was born into that couldn't fathom the work that went into the body of work she created.

Kirkpatrick, Gwen. (2024). "Alfonsina Storni and Alejandro Pizarnik." *A History of Argentine Literature*, Cambridge University Press.

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SATURDAY

Roused early, I walked barefoot
through the house; I went down to the gardens
and kissed the plants;
I inhaled the clean scent of the earth,
sprawled in the grass;
I bathed in the fountain ringed by green
arrowroots. Later, I combed
my dripping hair. I perfumed my hands
with the fragrant nectar of jasmine. Herons,
finicky, refined,
pinched from my lap golden crumbs.
Later I put on a linen dress, lighter
even than chiffon.
In one leap, I whisked to the front hall
my wicker armchair.
Fixed on the gate my eyes remained,
fixed on the gate.
The clock chimed: ten in the morning.
Inside, the sound of china and crystal:
dining room in shade; careful hands spreading
tablecloths.
Outside, sun as I have never seen
shining on the white marble staircase.
Fixed on the gate my eyes remained,
fixed. I waited for you.

Alfonsina Storni
from *El dulce daño*, 1918

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YOU WANT ME WHITE

You want me pure,
want me of sea foam,
mother-of-pearl.
To be the lily
of flowers, chaste.
Subtlest perfume.
Corolla unopened.

Not one ray of moonlight
to reach me.
Not even a daisy
to call herself my sister.
You want me innocent,
you want me white,
you want me pure.

You that had every
cup at hand,
fruits and honeys
purpling your lips.
You that at the feast-table
festooned with vines
wasted your flesh
drinking to Bacchus.
You that in the gardens
black with Deceit
wearing red
ran to Ruin.
You, your skeleton
still intact
I know not
by what miracles,

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you expect me white
(God forgive you)
you expect me chaste
(God forgive you)
you expect me pure.

Flee to the woods;
to the mountains go;
cleanse your mouth;
shelter in huts;
touch the wet ground
with your hands;
nourish your body
with bitter roots;
drink from the rocks;
sleep on frost;
renew every fiber
with saltpeter and water;
converse with the birds
and rise with the dawn.
And when your flesh
returns to you,
and when you have infused
it with your soul
that in the bedrooms
lay entangled,
then, good man,
count me white,
count me innocent,
count me chaste.

Alfonsina Storni
from *El dulce daño*, 1918

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HER

She is tall and she is perfect, of radiating blue
pupils, wherein stalks, listlessly, a living Eve.
Her skin is the skin of fruit. Her white flesh snows
and her braids intertwist like thick eels.

A forest of gold grows in her pale armpits.
From the trees breaks the fine new shoot.
Her mouth is the pitch-dark cave of death.
Her laugh wounds the breasts of sleeping birds.

Yesterday she passed by me, her ample hips,
her taut sinewy thighs lifting the skirt-lace,
her rouged lips, and seeing her I took fright,

for, such as she is, already predestined,
seeing her you realize, she strides, unresisting,
towards the first man who must possess her.

Alfonsina Storni
from *Ocre*, 1925

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