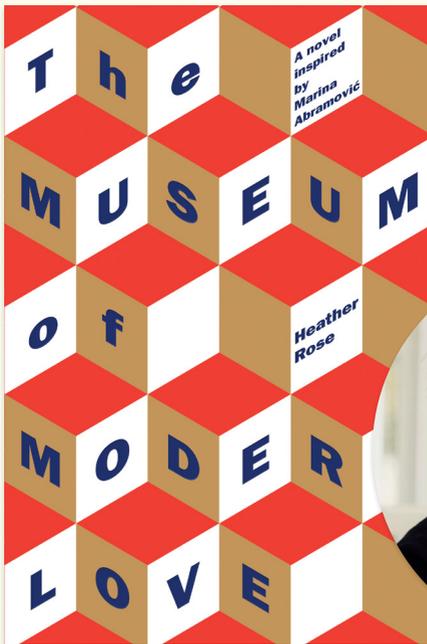




2017 STELLA PRIZE SHORTLIST

Sampler



Heather Rose

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN LOVE

HEALAYAS BREEN WATCHED THE PATTERN of the Marina Abramovic performance. The way the artist dropped her head as soon as a guest left and closed her eyes. Then she lifted her shoulders a little, stretched in minute ways, breathed, settled, and when she was ready, she lifted her head and met the gaze of the next person.

Healayas wondered what Abramovic ate for breakfast to sustain a day's sitting. Quinoa? Almonds? Spirulina smoothies? Fish? She'd read that Abramovic had been a vegetarian since scrubbing all those cow bones in Venice. The performance that had won her the Gold Lion.

Healayas waited, her legs crossed, her scarf pulled over her hair. The old habit of the hijab. And so effective at stopping all conversation with the people in the queue. MoMA had made Abramovic mass market. MoMA had given her a new following and the following was growing. What it would grow to, Healayas didn't know, but she suspected Abramovic would become a house-hold name, even if they didn't pronounce it correctly. She had heard all sorts of variations. This show was too brave, too simple, too hard not to be noticed far and wide.

The pain Abramovic was in wasn't obvious. And there was no nudity. No suggestion of sexuality. Up until now, Abramovic's work had been an acquired taste. Not everyone could relate to the rigour or the endurance. Cutting herself with razors. The flogging. Eating onions. The strange crystal phase Abramovic had gone through after the walk on the Great Wall of China. But suddenly all sorts of people were magnetised by her.

Abstinence, Healayas knew, was the last thing most Americans wanted to experience. Discomfort too. Much better if someone else was feeling it for you. Even better if you could laugh at it. Reality TV. The *Jackass* phenomenon. Johnny Knoxville and Spike Jonze had tapped into the powerful urge to use pain as a device. Mass market it may be, buffoonery for boys, but it was hard core and she understood that.

The first time Healayas had ever come across Marina Abramovic was a photograph of a performance called *Rhythm 10*. Abramovic was kneeling on the floor with a large kitchen knife in one hand. Her other hand

was splayed out on a piece of white paper.

The black-and-white film had been grainy, the sound indistinct. Abramovic had fanned twenty knives in front of her. She primed one tape deck then, taking the first knife, she tapped the point fast between each of her splayed fingers like a Slavic drinking game. Every time she cut herself, she chose a new knife. When she had used all twenty knives, she stopped the tape recording. She then listened back to the rhythm of the blades as they beat the floor. Priming the second tape recorder, she let the original tape roll and mimicked the exact pattern, cutting herself in exactly the same place at the same time, changing knives with each cut. Then she played the two tape recorders together listening to the original pattern and the new pattern. The mistakes of the past and the mistakes of the present were synchronised. It had taken place in Edinburgh in 1973, the same year Healayas was born.

Healayas had questions but Abramovic wasn't talking to the media for the seventy-five days of *The Artist is Present*. Healayas wondered if she was talking to anyone at all or if she remained silent in the mornings and the evenings away from here. How hard was that silence? Hardship was in her blood. But hardship had been learned as well. Healayas wondered if the years away from Serbia, the years crossing Europe, living in Amsterdam, teaching in Germany, the life she had here in New York, had filed down the ravages of Abramovic's childhood. Had a life of intense experiences smoothed her like a pebble on the ocean floor, polished her into the radiant woman sitting at the heart of the atrium, this statue of herself, immovable, unknowable?

Abramovic had once said that in theatre the blood wasn't real. The swords weren't real. But in performance art, everything was real. The knives cut, the whip ripped skin, the ice blocks froze flesh and the candles burned. For one piece, called *Lips of Thomas*, a naked Abramovic had lain on her back on huge blocks of ice forming a cross. Then she stood up and used a razor blade to slowly cut a large five-pointed star into her stomach. After each cut she ate from a kilo-jar of honey and drank from a bottle of red wine. She whipped her back over and over

with a cat-o'-nine tails until her skin burned in a mass of red welts. Donning a soldier's cap, she stood and listened to a Serbian hymn of war while holding a white flag stained from her bleeding stomach. For seven hours she repeated these actions in a cycle of freeze, cut, honey, wine, whip, song. When she'd first performed *Lips of Thomas* in Germany, she had been thirty-two. At the Guggenheim in 2005 she had been fifty-seven.

Did Abramovic leave MoMA each afternoon for a five-star hotel where she was cossetted by room service, masseurs and shiatsu therapists? Or did she go home to her Greenwich loft with her own pillow? What were her dreams? Healayas wondered if, when Abramovic closed her eyes at night, she saw the faces of all these strangers looking into her, wanting to catch her soul amid the shadows, wanting to draw a little piece of courage from her, wanting to scratch a length of skin from her cheek and eat it like a wafer from the altar of truth.

Healayas heard one of the people in the queue enthusing about the David Altmejd giant at the New Museum. She had loved it too. He was one of the sexiest men she had ever seen, all fibreglass and steel, a bird on his shoulder. Someone behind her was saying how inconvenient it was that the National Library reading room was closed while a performance took place each afternoon. And two people to her right were discussing the pleasures of reading *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*. As the morning stretched on into afternoon, the queue continued to deliver people to Abramovic's table. She is teaching them about time, Healayas thought. I have sat here for three hours, the morning has slipped away, and I have done nothing but think. She couldn't remember the last time she had done such a thing.

At last her turn came. She discarded her scarf, slipped off her shoes, crossed into the square and took her place. Abramovic lifted her head and their eyes met. It was the same tangible effect as the previous time, earlier in the week, as if she'd been plugged into an old resonance.

She settled into the gaze between them, aware of chatter and move-

ment in the atrium. But it was peripheral. She focused on the world of Abramovic's dark, moist eyes and pale mouth. She noticed her own eyes blinking, but Abramovic hardly blinked at all. Healyas stilled her breathing and reached into the darkness beyond Abramovic's eyes.

She saw white linen on the table, silverware and wineglasses half full. She began spreading a sliver of toast on her plate with parfait. She bit into it and the toast crunched between her teeth. The texture hit the roof of her mouth, the flavour languid and creamy. She detected salmon, black caviar, sour cream, dill, black pepper.

Instead of Abramovic, Tom sat opposite her in a white shirt, the way only Tom could wear a white shirt. He was smiling at her. Instantly her eyes filled with tears. He looked as he had looked that last winter, the shirt ironed, the salt-and-pepper hair just curling above his ears and swept back, the careful close two-day beard, the scent of something citrus on his skin.

'Alone?' he asked.

'So it seems,' she replied.

'Well, you know why.'

'Yes, I guess I do.' She gazed into his eyes.

'Not celibate?' he asked. 'Like being on a diet for you.'

'My senses become dull without sex. So of course I am not celibate.'

'You are still terrifying.'

The glass before him was full of red wine and he put it to his lips and drank. The same lips that had done such wonderful things to her body.

'A man can never really love a woman who is an artist,' she said, leaning in across the table, drawn to smell him.

'Is that what I said?'

'Yes,' she replied. She wanted to bite his skin until she could feel the texture of it in her mouth. She wanted to suck the smell of him inside her. He had gazed into her eyes as he orgasmed, and told her that he loved her as he exhaled.

She smelled steak and looked down to see chateaubriand, green beans, a truff led pommes puree, sauce Bernaise and a red wine jus.

It was a meal they had shared in Australia. Two weeks in the heat and tropical rain making love and every night eating the most exquisite food at a little restaurant with canvas awnings, a giant fig tree and the raucous noise of fruit bats.

'So, are you singing?' he asked.

'Not much. We've got the Lime Club starting in June, but I haven't heard from Arky. Lydia . . .' She trailed off.

'Are you still angry with me?'

'Yes.' She sipped the burgundy and felt the oak run under her tongue. 'I have never given my heart to anyone like I gave it to you.'

'Ditto,' he said.

'Why wasn't it enough?'

'Sometimes it was.'

'How will I ever trust a man again?'

'That's not a question for me.'

'How do you know?'

'You were asking it before I came along.'

'That's not true.'

'Yes. It is. It was claustrophobic.'

She became aware of the buzz of people. The face before her with its pale skin and shining eyes. She felt tears on her face. She saw tears in Abramovic's eyes. How had that happened? How had she slipped into some other place with Tom in a restaurant?

She continued to gaze at Abramovic but the vision did not reappear. It was over. There was nothing more. She inhaled, dropped her head, closed her eyes, stood up and crossed the room back to her shoes and bag. She had no words. She went down the stairs, across the lobby, out into the bright street, past trestle tables selling celebrity coffee cups and film scripts. Then, only then, did she laugh. It rippled out of her like a huge wave of relief.

'My god,' she said. 'My god.' She checked her watch. She had sat for over an hour. She must hurry. She was due at work by five.