

I dive under the covers

Sheila Heti

HEROINES

by Kate Zambreno.

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IN 2009 Kate Zambreno went to live in Akron, Ohio, the sort of place you only choose if the situation is desperate. She was there because her husband had been hired to 'curate and organise a small collection of rare books at the university . . . the gift of a rubber industrialist'. Friends asked why they'd made this uninspiring move. 'The economy, you know. I mumble. A great job. (I really want to say: I DON'T FUCKING KNOW. But I don't. I tell the mutual lie of our marriage.)' Now exiled from cosmopolitan Chicago, having already been exiled there from New York, she writes in *Heroines*: 'I am realising you become a wife, despite the mutual attempt at an egalitarian partnership, once you agree to move for him. You are placed into the feminine role – you play the pawn.' The distressing fact of her wifedom is one of the central threads in *Heroines*: how will this young woman make sense of being a wife, and what sort of wife is she? And can she both be a wife and what she most longs to be – an artist, a writer, someone who speaks to the world and is heard?

It may seem like an old-fashioned problem (of course she can!), yet it's a real one, and to investigate it Zambreno looks back at an old-fashioned world, to perhaps the origin of the possibility of wife-and (and-writer, and-genius): the early 20th century. She discusses Zelda Fitzgerald and 'Vivien(ne)' Eliot, as well as a number of other 'women often marginalised in the modernist memory project', whom she calls her 'eternal reference point . . . an invisible community'. *Heroines* is narrated by a voice that is never identified as 'Kate Zambreno', yet has all the markers of being her (both she and the narrator run a blog called *Frances Farmer Is My Sister*; both are married to a man called John). The book is a composite creature: part memoir, part criticism, part fiction, part feminist tract or call to arms or self-help manual or biography or work of literary history. Perhaps the best clue to what she's doing comes when the narrator considers 'training to be a psychoanalyst, and I will become a feminist analyst to tortured, eccentric artists.' This would be her diagnostic manual.

The writing is clipped, each sentence hovering on the edge of a cliff, as if each full stop marked the final statement of a suicide note, or Zambreno's own last words: a definitive, ringing declaration. Here, any sentence could be the last:

After her breakdown, Tom placed his wife in a sanatorium, sent euphemistically 'to the country'. It would become a rhythm of confinement. He would jaunt to the French Riv and hang out with all the sexy Ballet Russes dancers. While in the asylum she scribbled out an SOS to Ezra Pound, signing herself 'Little Nell' in letters (another character, Dickens's doomed girl-heroine, always seeing herself as a fiction). Of course he did nothing to help. None of the Eliots' friends were really her friends. They all betrayed her. She was the minor character.

Zambreno is usually talking about a historical figure, or several at once, or about her own life, or comparing her female subjects to herself. The comparisons aren't meant to flatter her: their purpose is broader. She is endeavouring to create a type and determine whether and to what ex-

tent she belongs to it. She needs to do this because she doesn't trust the inherited pictures of female types, since they are produced by 'the patriarch' who 'decides on the form of communication. Decides on the language.' Her task is urgent because we can only understand ourselves if others like us have come before. To imagine we are the first and only of our kind is certainly alienation.

So the comparisons begin: 'We echoed the Eliots. Marrying fast out of a sense of noble adventure (they had known each other three months, we had known each other nine).' Jane and Paul Bowles are always on the move – so are she and John. Zelda and Virginia Woolf had debilitating periods and headaches – she does, too. How far can she go? In one scene, she looks at Simone Weil. 'I am Simone Weil,' she declares, 'although Simone Weil pushed bravely past her sinus headaches, working in the fields and organising worker protests, and writing her crystalline philosophical texts in her notebooks, while at the slightest hint of sinus troubles I dive under the covers. I am the exact opposite of Simone Weil.'

The unfortunate thing for Zambreno is that the women she has chosen are all mad. Or perhaps they weren't mad, but were driven mad by their lives: their men, their culture, the doctors who didn't understand them, and especially by the oppressiveness of their husbands' genius and work, in which they were routinely turned into literature – the sickness came partly from being a character in someone else's creation, a heroine not of one's own making or in one's own words. All we know for sure of these women survives in scraps – in their letters, in the few biographies, in the scant literary texts they managed to write, and in the way they appeared in the poems, novels and reports of people more famous than they were. 'There appears to be a project to destroy these remnants, these reminders,' Zambreno writes, 'to destroy these women. And I have married a keeper of archives. I feel compelled to act as the literary executor of the dead and erased. I'm responsible for guarding their legacy.'

Zambreno has long been fascinated by those who are silenced. Her two previous books – both novels – gave voice to traditionally voiceless characters. In *Green Girl*, to an ordinary shop girl, her inner life a mystery because she is young and female and no one is interested in what she thinks. She cannot sort out her life, has no external referents. In *O Fallen Angel* the characters include a 'good' Midwestern housewife, her misfit daughter and a 'madman' in the street, whose inner monologues tear up the pages. Zambreno said in an interview that she's 'really interested in the silent scream and how we are muted in society, Bacon's mouths, Helene Weigel's mouth wide open screaming an empty loss in *Mother Courage*,

Munch's Scream'. She's 'trying to write towards' those who are 'dumb and deaf but inside writhing with unwordable agony'. What enrages her on behalf of these wives is that 'their spiritual autobiographies' were appropriated by men who 'didn't really know these women they write of so ecstatically'. Were she simply to explain this, it would be interesting, but it is gripping and complicated because she performs the appropriation. She speaks for the women and as the women in a voice that merges theirs and her own, which is what the writer-geniuses she reviles did to the same women in their great works – *The Waste Land*, *The Great Gatsby* – and is also what she most reviles them for. Yet she, of course, is as much a husband-genius as a wife. She is the published writer in the family – it's she who documents her husband, not him her – and even in their domestic life she speaks of 'John who wifes me. Who Leonard Woolfs me.'

The hated vampirisms of the modernist husbands are never far from her own vampirisms (or hervamping). There's something dizzying and grotesque in her performance, as she tries to resurrect these women while inadvertently shrouding them.

She is both male and female, victim and oppressor. Yet her technique of ventriloquism – or, as she puts it, becoming 'so possessed by a character you begin to play the part. A sort of Method Acting that is also a conjuring up' – is one of the book's best provocations. It was also one of the most misunderstood on its publication last autumn. The book received a flurry of attention, particularly online, but there were also scorching notices. In the *Los Angeles Review of Books* Emily Keeler said she was 'offended . . . by the histories Zambreno investigates . . . and by the author herself, by her method. She sets herself among the dead, channels them, digs them up, and tries on their clothes . . . the women under discussion remain underground, forgotten, maligned, pushed even further into the margins.'

The clothing comment is interesting: outfits and make-up play a large role in the book. In her early days in Akron, Zambreno has 'short cropped hair' and a 'black Joan of Arc jacket, shiny from years of wear', which she guesses is 'perhaps a sartorial revolt from my new, more feminine role'. Later, while immersed in the legend of Zelda Fitzgerald, she buys 'glittery silver toenail polish from OPI's Swiss collection, a homage to her time in the Swiss asylum'. Zambreno is writing as an actress here, not only showing us the performance but taking us backstage to reveal her research. Wouldn't an actress in a biopic try on the clothes her character might have worn, and read biographies and relate the icon's experiences to her own? Zambreno is this kind of researcher, pulling on feelings, dresses,

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applying nail polish, in order to perform the wives. She does it to understand them, and to empathise, the better to communicate the suffering she imagines (probably not wrongly) they endured, which she also endures, not simply because she's playing, but because playing isn't simple, and because some of the parallels are real.

Zambreno's publisher and editor at Semiotext(e), the novelist and art critic Chris Kraus, has called her own books 'performance philosophy', citing Kierkegaard, who spoke through voices not exactly his own, as the genre's spiritual father. Kraus's 'performance philosophy' is practised by the actor-like writer, who finds it necessary to enact in her life – and to experience in her body – what she wants to write before putting it into words. This is in contrast, presumably, to more introverted writers of 'contemplative philosophy', who don't need to live something in order to write it, who use their 'imaginings'. William Vollmann, with whom Zambreno professes a sympathy, intentionally puts himself in extreme situations, then writes about them. David Foster Wallace (to whom Zambreno doesn't relate) in his fiction seemingly did not.

So when Keeler, offended by Zambreno's appropriation of the identities of these women, asks, 'at what point does recognising feminine likeness turn into an erasure, a return to obliterating sameness?' she seems not to understand Zambreno's technique, or to appreciate that *Heroines* is anything but straightforward. Even Zambreno gets confused about the distance between what she's imagining and what her life is. When she has a roaring fight with her husband she calls him 'violent': 'He tears me into rags and rages.' But after they've calmed down he tells her: 'I erase you. That's the worst thing I can do, is erase you.' Subdued, she tells herself: 'I must remember, John is not Tom Eliot. John is not Leonard Woolf. We might slip into these roles, we might play these ghosts' – but that's all. She's also the first to question the ethics of her approach. At one point she condemns herself for flattening and glamorising the heroines she is reading about: 'I who devour these lives. I who Bovarise.' *Heroines* began as fiction. Zambreno pitched Kraus a novel called 'Mad Wife', about 'a Madame Bovary living in the Rust Belt who overidentifies with her characters'. The spirit of that book remains. 'God it's boring here. Stuck in the provinces,' Zambreno writes. 'Of course

since we've moved here I've been reading *Madame Bovary*. I am Madame Bovary as I read *Madame Bovary*. Ennui, excess of emotions. *C'est moi*.'

Midway through the book, she seeks the conventional form of relief for her anxieties and excesses:

I go see a therapist off the highway in near-by Canton, Ohio, who tells me I have an 'adjustment disorder'. She tells me this in the first appointment after what is called a diagnostic interview, when I answer questions on a list. Crying jags. Yes. Throwing things. Yes. It's unnerving, this new model of your basic mall psychology . . . She must diagnose me, she says, for insurance reasons. I go look up 'adjustment disorder' online in the DSM-IV . . . I have exhibited 'marked distress that is in excess of what would be expected from exposure to the stressor' that has caused 'a significant impairment in social or occupational (academic) functioning' . . . I am technically disordered but not really mad, at least not medically. It's temporary, instead of one of the other more stigmatised categories on the Axis I, which is why it's so often diagnosed. Yet I am mad, I am furious, I do not want to live here . . . I roll this around in my mouth – adjustment disorder. A woman is supposed to adjust, to go with her husband. To be brought to reason . . . twice as many women are diagnosed with these vague adjustment disorders. I realise this therapist has probably never read Deleuze, or Foucault or Elaine Showalter, I remember I am against psychiatry, I do not return.

Zambreno doesn't write with the measured voice of someone who can count on being listened to, but with the wail of someone confined to a shed. She wonders if she's writing 'the text of an author or a madwoman' and fears she's 'a depressive masquerading as a notetaker', yet at the same time she challenges this stigmatisation and hunts out its source. 'I distrust the feminine in literature,' she quotes T.S. Eliot, and cites a sour letter Flaubert wrote to his mistress: 'Don't you feel everything is currently dissolving into the humid element – tears, chatter, breast-feeding. Contemporary literature is drowning in women's menses.' She points out the hypocrisy in the way these 'Great Men' were unable to abide the real women beside them or the female literary voice while at the same time they 'fetichised the hysteric, they channelled hysteria, both in style (automatic writing), as well as in their writing of these female characters.' She thinks of 'the acidic Austrian novelist Elfriede Jelinek, at home in her designer clothes, always, always at

home. Yet isn't the Great Male Writer also under self-imposed house arrest? Who gets to say what's pathological?'

In Flaubert's house, servants and everyone in the household tiptoed around him in the a.m. while he worked, until he rang the bell, his cursory unspoken cue, a servant would run up and hand him a glass of water, which he'd drink, and a newspaper, which he scanned. Then he'd pound on the wall, his mother would come and sit and converse with him, a happy helpmate, lunch, a long leisurely walk, then the Work, met with trembling and awe by the others, evenings of society and reading out loud to his writer-friends, the occasional excursions to Paris to fuck his mistress. This is before he ever published a thing. Except something in a local paper. He was milked and fed and cultivated and allowed. He was encouraged, and enabled, to become Flaubert . . . lines built upon lines. That is how one writes. Slowness. Wait. And in the isolation of that room, a belief in oneself that could be construed as monstrous. In one's own Eventual Greatness. No little voices that wormed through to whisper in one's ear: Sick Sick Sick.

IN THE SECOND PART of *Heroines* Zambreno and her husband have moved to North Carolina. 'A sudden reversal, I encourage John to take the position.' Her subjects have changed too: the wives are more contemporary and productive (Elizabeth Hardwick, Sylvia Plath). And the text grows more polemical, as when she tells us:

It drives me absolutely bonkers that the mythology of Zelda, as endlessly repeated by Scott's biographers . . . dictates some narrative that she was not disciplined enough, and that is why she did not succeed as an artist. She was absolutely disciplined. My god, she twisted and contorted herself into a dancer within years . . . Zelda did not succeed as a writer because she was brainwashed into believing that she was ill and that her art came out of her illness.

Is this true? Was she perhaps not a good enough (or disciplined enough) artist?

A note of self-pity also enters the text. She is waiting for her first book to be published, a 'slim nervous novella', when she meets a man she once slept with whose 'ONE THOUSAND PAGE NOVEL' is about to come out. She thinks: 'He is pulling out his cock and comparing it with those writers with whom he will be compared' – James Joyce, Tolstoy, David Foster Wallace. 'I will be compared to nobody.' She spends weeks having 'an existential crisis' because 'only one of us can be called an artist.' Since this part of the book is more essayistic, and Zambreno seems to be talking about the real world and not a world that is at least partly allegorical, one feels obliged to object. What about all the female writers who are called 'artists', or the many who don't flirt with madness or wilt glamorously? What about the women writers who do have 'the tremendous EGO' required to do the work? Simone de Beauvoir, Gertrude Stein, Hannah Arendt, Alice Munro, Jeanette Winterson, Anne Carson. Why am I even making this list?

By the end of the book, I felt for Flaubert. 'The humid element', the 'tears, chatter, breast-feeding . . . menses', was too much for me, too. I was more comfortable in Part 1, where the 'veil of art' shimmered over

the pages. In Part 2, I was repelled. *Heroines* is in poor taste, an offence even to those of us who aren't easily offended, a confrontation. Yet I'm sceptical of my response. Perhaps Zambreno is right: we can't stand 'the humid element' because we can't stand the female element, as it is expressed by some female writers. Just because I'm a woman, it doesn't mean I'm apart from society. If my moments of revulsion are a result of my conditioning, if it seems 'in poor taste', then I have been conditioned well. So the real question for this book might be, not whether it's palatable, but does it clear a space for a certain kind of female writing, or does it risk making that work even more marginal? I think it clears a space. It shows us that something thought to be on the fringe – a certain intense female voice – has been central all along. And it gives whoever is inclined to write this way the permission to do so and the urge to follow Zambreno's path or go to other 'unacceptable' places.

Heroines is dedicated to an author friend, 'to writing ourselves as our own characters', and to 'the girls who still seem, as they did in Virginia Woolf's time, so fearfully depressed'. In the final pages she addresses this second reader directly: a reader who has now narrowed to a young Kate Zambreno, a woman who longs to write but feels pre-emptively marginalised and silenced. She advises writing a lot, writing 'the self', and doing it in public, on a blog, for there one can find community with other female bloggers. She says that such women 'have started to reinvent the spaces of modernism with their networks and little magazines'.

But is Zambreno, the feminist analyst, proposing the best cure for these women? She calls the blogosphere a 'space that's safe, that's our own', yet it is also potentially a ghetto. Doesn't a writer need to enter an unsafe space, as Zambreno does with this book? Only in unsafe spaces does 'unsafe' writing make interesting things happen. Is true freedom bleeding diaristically on the internet? Or does freedom mean taking the time to craft something, using one's skills as well as one's feelings? Isn't freedom the freedom to take oneself seriously enough to put years of application into a finished work of art and fight it into the world? Maybe I'm being old-fashioned, yet I can't help think that Zambreno must agree. After all, she spent seven years on this book.

At the end of last year, she wrote on her blog:

I have been criticised lately of writing a bad book, a flawed book, a book that needs to be more disciplined, a book that needs to be better, a book that needs to be a better scholar, a book that needs to be less obsessive and emotional and mad, a book that needs to be less vain, less circling around vanity. Did I say book? I meant self.

It's clear that publishing *Heroines* was difficult, and writing it too. Even calling herself a 'writer', Zambreno says, felt beyond her at times. When, in a consultation with a doctor, she manages to tell him, 'I am a writer,' he replies: 'I write too.' Then he asks her: 'Tell me, do you enjoy the novels of Julian Barnes?' □

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