

# Woman to Woman

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**NOT ONE DAY** BY ANNE GARRÉTA, TRANSLATED FROM FRENCH BY EMMA RAMADAN DALLAS: DEEP VELLUM. 150 PAGES. \$15.

I must start with the ending: In a post-script to her collection of highly crafted stories of desire, French novelist and professor Anne Garréta undermines the project she has developed in the preceding chapters. Throughout, she conjures past lovers and those she has wanted—one woman after another, fashioned into words from memory. Then she casts doubt on the entire pursuit. Why write about women who incited desire—even if the desire held a terrifying sway—when we live in the time of the logorrhea of desire? There’s surely nothing transgressive left about it in our age of “pornocracy.” How to write about desiring women—how to desire women—when whole exploitative economies are now built on precisely that desire? “What if, thinking you are resisting the pull of the dominant discourse, you were in fact practicing that very French form of resistance we call collaboration?”

But the project survives this final *cri* of disillusionment. Despite its author’s protestations, we definitely haven’t read this book before. Garréta is an Oulipian, therefore she proposes to abide by certain constraints: one remembered woman per day, five daytime hours at the computer, one resulting chapter. Yet in the final section we learn that the rules have been broken multiple times: There has been procrastination, nighttime writing due to insomnia, distraction. She even reveals that one of the stories is purely fictional. This is authorial mischief, of course. One alleged pollution affects the entire work—if an unknown chapter is fictional, then all the chapters are fictional, and we have here a work of fiction with a fundamentally elusive narrative position. (All this is moot if you look at the original 2002 edition of the book, its yellow Grasset cover bearing the word *roman*. Novels are allowed to do all kinds of perverse things in France.)

A couple of chapters start by play-employing a familiar masculine approach: a sexual subject in command of the writing voice, looking over the available women and classifying them. Across its vast and diverse expanse, the heterosexual male canon of desire of the last century—whether it’s fiction that follows in Henry Unstoppable-Sex-Machine Miller’s footsteps, the penis novel in the tradition of *Portnoy’s Complaint*, or a Jean Guerreschi-type paean to female parts—tends to occupy that same basic position, making the woman always the object. Whereas when a woman enters Garréta’s writing, the teller and the telling lose their bearings. And while the stories here suggest that Garréta is a top in real life, she is not interested in continuing the tradition of top writing that men maintain so diligently. (That only makes for automatons in a stock plot.)

For example, the first story refers to the complications of having one lover in Paris, another in New York, a third in Italy, and a fourth woman of interest who was a guest at a dinner that has just ended—yet events don’t proceed as expected. The seduction plan gets tangled in an exegesis of signals—*did I see or did I imagine?*—and as the narrator takes a hidden path to visit the fourth woman, the story ends on a freeze-frame of long threads of spiderweb against the walker’s

face in the dark. In a chapter set in a nightclub, we observe the aloof narrator’s gradual surrender to mad desire for a woman next to her, an old acquaintance *who didn’t appeal to her, who wasn’t even her type*. Another chapter describes sex-filled weekends with D\*, a conventionally beautiful heterosexual woman; the experience could have been narrated as idyllic, she muses, but was in fact a “pornographic, solipsistic alienation”: A straight woman chooses a lover and demands that her fantasies of domination be fulfilled. That lover is only accidentally another woman, so the relationship remains “strictly heterosexual.” Two chapters don’t even involve a woman she desires. The story of driving through deserted landscapes at night on American highways, passing the gas stations and motels and churches, “Baptist, Pentecostal, Exxon, Adventist, Best Western, Baptist, Sunoco,” is also a story of not minding being lost, perhaps actively seeking it: an allegory of desire. (Today, the America of this chapter reads as fragile, in need of an embrace—an innocent place circa 2000 that had no clue what would happen to it in 2017.)

Garréta is a *dix-huitième*, an eighteenth-century scholar, and that century makes itself felt at many a turn. The eighteenth-century writing of desire is marked by knowingness and worldliness, a shrewd comedic tone that loses its dominance by the nineteenth century, when love hardens down to one other person and takes on the contours of tragedy. Marivaux, Mozart and Da Ponte operas, and *Les Liaisons dangereuses* are very different in spirit from *Werther*, *Wuthering Heights*, Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*, or Schubert’s *Lieder* settings of Wilhelm Müller’s poems. Garréta knows both styles of literary treatment of desire well, and her book desires in both ways. Several chapters are poignant and at least two of those heartbreaking. In one, the narrator, parsing her memories of K\*, reaches the realization that she actually loved her, and in this utterance alone she breaks down and abandons the second-person singular, which has been the mode of address of the entire book, for the first person. In an equally affecting story near the end, the narrator learns from a mutual friend that a woman revered in their shared literary milieu had secretly liked her back, but eventually had decided to entrust her affections to someone else. It’s a chapter in which alternate lives, hidden perspectives, and choices not made vibrate into an intense yet ghostly evocation of thwarted desire. There are so many potential obstacles in the human comedy between a woman and a woman, but, the narrator wonders, should she not have had at least an inkling of where on the chessboard they both were? Or does the possibility of love quail before status and money, in a world that’s “nothing but a battlefield splayed with interests, fights, and strategic ruses of ambition and power, inauthentic through and through”? As is its wont, desire will not stay neatly in its riverbank: It bleeds into questions of love and of life’s purpose, and wrecks the best-laid Oulipian plans. □

Lydia Perović’s most recent book is the novella *All That Sang* (Véhicule Press, 2016).