*Without Protection*, by Gala Mukomolova rev. by Ani Oganisian

Coffee House Press

In *Without Protection*, released on April 9, 2019, Gala Mukomolova navigates her complex identity through a series of poetry and prose. While this is her first full length published work, Mukomolova previously published a chapbook in 2018 entitled *One Above One Below: Positions & Lamentations*, after graduating with her MFA at the University of Michigan and winning the 2016 Discovery/ Boston Review Poetry Prize. Her poetry and essays have appeared in *POETRY*, *PEN America*, *the Billfold* and other various literature outlets and she currently writes astrology for *Nylon Magazine*. In *Without Protection*, the author attempts to find her sense of self within her complex and tangled identity as a lesbian, Russian Jew immigrant. Through autobiographical poetry, scattered scraps of prose, and the weaving of the Russian fairytale of Vasilyssa, the author gives the audience a raw, unfiltered glimpse of different aspects of her world—which includes the beautiful, the vulnerable, and the sordid.

The form of the book itself is interesting, as the author transitions between poetry and prose pieces. The poetry offers a gateway for the author to share her life experiences through the eyes of a fairytale heroine. In “Vasilyssa Comes to Call,” we follow the character’s treacherous journey: “Baba’s disembodied hand tracks her / through the thicket branches snatch blood on her dress. / Mud-kneed, Vasilyssa opens/ Baba’s gate.” While the pieces of poetry have a level mysticism, the prose has very raw and real tones. Just two pages after “Vasilyssa Comes to Call,” in a prose piece entitled “She calls me just like I knew she would,” the author reminisces about writing essays for a woman she had feelings for. Mukomolova remembers being “up late deciphering Kate Chopin’s angels for her because [she was] a philosopher.” The prose pieces are not centered in Vasilyssa’s mythical world, but are from the author’s direct experiences, whether they are recollections of sexual encounters, disturbing things she witnessed in her day-to-day life, and even Craigslist ads. These bits of prose allow for the work to be grounded and allow the audience to connect with the speaker in order to understand the work is autobiographical.

Tonally, the book is dark and cloudy, giving off the impression that the entire world of the narrator is dingy. In “Vasilyssa Considers a Dark Path,” a piece that embodies the tone of the work as a whole, the author recalls a feeling of loneliness and solitude: “Everyone knows you can’t / enter a house with no doors / Slow rot between her throat / and heart, it’s not darkness / that scares her. Bones glint / moonlight and bonesorrow / The house is always spinning.” The space the heroine is entering is dark and ominous. Saying that the house has “no doors” and is “always spinning” adds a tone of dread to the piece, allowing the audience to really grasp how the atmosphere affects the life and mood the heroine and speaker of the poems. By maintaining this dark tone throughout the book, the audience is better able to understand the difficulty of allowing one’s soul and identity come to light.

The stand-out element of her work is Mukomolova’s use of beautiful metaphors and similes. In “Return,” the author recalls her relationship with her mother: “We, the daughters between countries, wear our mean mothers like scarves around our necks.” The simile does not complicate the idea; it is clear and enhances the thought because the reader sees how overbearing and suffocating the relationship between mother and daughter can be, yet how one cannot do without it when the weather turns cold. In “A girl brings me home to nothing,” the author narrates, “I ask her why she’s not kissing me. All the butterflies in the room are choking on pot smoke.” While the metaphor is simple, by painting the image of innocent butterflies “choking on pot smoke,” it effectively highlights the theme of the poem revolving around the idea of using feelings of love to mask feelings of emptiness.

*Without Protection* beautifully represents the life of a New York City woman who is struggling to carve out her own identity from within. The world she creates has a dark, threatening tone, as if there is danger at every turn without a safe zone in sight. Within the poetry and prose pieces, Mukomolova uses poetic language to enhance her imagery and make it three dimensional, without confusing the audience with overly complicated diction and images. With these elements, she has successfully pieced together a whole world from snippets of her lifetime, giving the audience an insight into the life of a woman who refuses to assimilate into the norm.