

Poems, Lydia Tomkiw (Universal Exports of North America)

Lydia Tomkiw is probably better known as half of Algebra Suicide, an inventive and eclectic post-punk duo which found Tomkiw declaiming her lyrics over drum machines and electric guitar. If you're lucky you might find their albums secondhand, otherwise some of this music is still available on a couple of Bandcamp compilations.

Tomkiw was also an accomplished poet – although many poems were used as lyrics – and was championed in the UK by Martin Stannard and Geoff Hattersley, who both undertook a reading tour with her, whilst the latter published her book *The Dreadful Swimmers* through his imprint The Wide Skirt. Otherwise, Tomkiw's publications were pamphlets and chapbooks, some self-produced, all now impossible to find. Until, that is, the publication of this 409 page book, which I have only just come across, although it bears a 2020 copyright date.

The band and poet both came out of Chicago in the late 70s/early 80s, part of a widespread surge in independent cassette and record labels, mail art, makeshift venues and mostly *attitude*. I first came across Algebra Suicide on tape anthologies from bedroom labels, often swapped for other tapes, and was immediately seduced by the sexy vocals and piercing guitars on their mostly short, sharp 'songs'. Many are emotional recollections or declamations, apparently confessional memories; others seem openly sexual, full of lust and longing. An impression encouraged by the title of one of her chapbooks, *Ballpoint Erection*, and those of various poems such as 'Desire', 'The Hips of a Woman', 'Boys in Bed' and 'Lazy Sweat'.

On the page, the words are sometimes simplistic, but always frank and open. In 'True Romance at the World's Fair', the text moves from the opening 'A whispered remark changed a girl's life. / Make no mistake there was a difference.' to 'mother-in-law trouble' and 'A jitterbug wedding and an itch that started quick', before the subject of the piece goes walkabout:

Dressed in the most attractive of rubber suits,
Posing as a young girl, unmarried and unknissed
She set out to answers questions.

One of which is 'what brings out the beast in man?' However, she soon discovers that

this ain't no musical romp,
No screwball comedy;
This is just dog-collared loneliness:
The world,
The world is not a wild place.

Is that last line about disappointment, failure, or just a frank summary and conclusion? At the risk of confusing author and poems, Tomkiw in person was in many ways wild. Post-divorce from her musical partner and husband, Tomkiw took to drink and despair, only

starting to come out of it when she and her friend the poet Sharon Mesmer moved to New York City in 1994. There she tried to make new literary and musical connections, undertaking readings and holding a launch party for a solo album, before she ran out of steam and faded from view. In 2004 her widowed mother asked her to move to Phoenix, Arizona, which she did. Little is known beyond that date: there was no public presence, only the news that Tomkiw had died – of natural causes – in 2007.

Thankfully, designer and advertising executive Dan Shepelavy took on the task of assembling and editing Tomkiw's collected works. This beautifully put together book gathers up 180 uncollected poems, an introduction by Paul Hoover, a personal recollection by Sharon Mesmer, a detailed and factual history of Tomkiw by the editor, and a musical overview of Algebra Suicide. Each of the four chapbooks reprinted here are re-presented as they were originally published.

It's clear Tomkiw was interested in reaching an audience with her poetry. Shepelavy writes that she 'utterly rejected poetry's endemic tendency towards the insular and hermetic, craving connection and engagement.' He claims that '[e]mboldened by punk's example, Tomkiw helped redefine the boundaries of poetic performance', suggesting that the '[n]ow established form like slam and spoken word, the promiscuous intermingling of music and verse', can all be traced back to 'those raucous Chicago nightclubs and basements'.

There are elements of both hyperbole and truth there, which in a way dodge the real issues. Riding the zeitgeist of punk and post-punk always meant you were going to be left behind when musical fashions changed, whilst wanting to be taken seriously as a poet is never helped by being popular or populist – you get your fame perhaps, but rarely do you get 'literary recognition' or critical acceptance, however wrong that might be.

It feels hard to separate 'connection and engagement' from the notion of fame, although Shepelavy argues that 'Fame was a diversion all along' and that 'Lydia Tomkiw's work remains precious proof of imagination taking hold of reality and bending it to requirements – reality made to rescue, reclaim, seduce, exhilarate, amuse, and transcend.'

He's not wrong, and although Tomkiw seemed to want fame as proof of her imagination, her poems and songs, she was also aware it might not happen in the way she wanted. 'Sometimes' ends with a verse of both resignation and hope:

Sometimes, things are heinous and torture us to tears
And we want everything we could possibly imagine,
And we want it to be glowing and pretty,
But we settle for something that
Might shine bright in years to come.

And here it is, a book shining brightly. In 'Coup de Grace', Tomkiw declares that

You won't forget me:
I'll be warm and wet in the thin winter air;
I'll be the murmur, the secret like crazy.

As another poem says: 'It's time to reap the fun we've sown.' *Poems* is seriously fun, seriously engaging, disturbing and enjoyable. You should buy it and share the secret.

Rupert Loydell, June 2022