

Into the heart of darkness

The Lizard's Tail
By Luisa Valenzuela
Farrar, Straus & Giroux,
280 pp., \$16.59

By Elizabeth Hanly

A frolicking, wise-cracking, finger-licking witchdoctor is loose in Luisa Valenzuela's most recent novel, *The Lizard's Tail*. He calls himself Keeper of Pain, Keeper of Fear. Valenzuela's coup here—her triumph—is the creation of a language and a structure that allow the reader to poke around at her Sorcerer and eventually to stand close enough for him to steal the air one breathes.

The Lizard's Tail is in part Valenzuela's effort to understand how a decade of bloodletting came to pass in her native Argentina. Thinly veiled historical references constantly reach out to the reader. The whole Peronist gang is here: the Generalissimo (Juan Peron), the Dead Woman (Eva Peron), her successor the Intruder (Isabel Peron) and later, after the 1976 coup that ousted Isabel Peron, the disembodied and nearly indistinguishable voices of all those generals with their talk of national reconstruction and getting away with murder. The Sorcerer strolls, lord of it all, underground amid his Indian maidens, his slaves, his honey-pots and his instruments, at home in, quite literally, an ant-hill paradise. Valenzuela's sorcerer is modeled

after Lopez-Rega, Isabel Peron's minister of social well-being. An intimate of Isabelita's Lopez-Rega published several volumes on sorcery and is also credited with creating and nurturing Argentina's AAA—an 'extreme right-wing, para-military terrorist organization with innumerable tentacles.

But to consider *The Lizard's Tail* only as political parody is to head cocksure into a labyrinth. Valenzuela is interested in myth. She's among those who equate myth-making with identity—individually or collectively. And myth-making presupposes a deep dive into the unconscious. There's a whole tradition, to which Erich Neumann's Jungian classic, *Art and the Creative Unconscious* is central, which argues that the artist as hero is responsible not only for mirroring a culture but for healing it. Patterns, textures and figures brought up by the artist can gradually reshape the cultural canon, making it more complete. This same tradition defines myth as the collective dream of a people. And, as in a dream where all the characters, the fragments, even the colors are reflections of oneself, so Valenzuela enters into the story.

There are a handful of voices in *The Lizard's Tail*; most are developed with first-person narrative. Valenzuela is there, disturbingly close to the Sorcerer as he ruminates about his natural right



Argentinian novelist Luisa Valenzuela offers a dissection of fascism.

to cause pain. She's there again, a play within a play, as the writer who wrestles with her fictionalized biography and then, after receiving an invitation from her character to his Bacchanalia, must wonder who is creating whom. And all this is happening, even as her own lover is being tracked—in the brutal Argentine style of the mid-'70s—by the AAA.

A certain cadence runs through *The Lizard's Tail*. It's always there; sometimes broad and leisurely, sometimes tightening to a climax. Riding this rhythm on almost every page are the words of an old Argentine prophecy—"A river of blood will flow"—which

goes on to promise 20 years of peace.

There is no peace here—there's barely a plot here—but there is a river of language as rich as blood. Nothing is static in *The Lizard's Tail*. Valenzuela hinges her story on images and metaphors, mostly organic ones, multitudes of them—always moving, colliding, expanding, recreating each other like a kaleidoscope. Most every metaphor suggests another one. Images pierce through all the layers, stunning the reader with all their accumulated meaning.

But Valenzuela the poet is never far from Valenzuela the punster. There's a logic in the lan-

and a relentless humor that keeps the reader off-balance.

The Sorcerer wants a child—more accurately, the Sorcerer wants a son. He's betting he can outsmart the earth and have one "without the help of any woman, without the support of hostile powers." A great deal of the novel's action revolves around his preparations to do just that. Early on one discovers that the Sorcerer has a third testicle that he regards with rapture as his sister and soulmate, his feminine aspect—Estrella, the Morning Star. Estrella will bear their child. Later, however, the Sorcerer has serious doubts about whether to allow this birth or whether "I myself shall retain I myself forever in my innards."

Feminine values are spat upon here. Indeed, the Sorcerer plays regularly with chemicals, hoping to find a combination to speedily dissolve as many uteri as possible. No more corruption, he reasons. With Eros plucked out at the roots, what remains is bloodlust. Valenzuela, speaking as herself in the novel, describes the effects of a meltdown of such feminine values. "I no longer feel time passing in me. I only know of separation, a great cultural broth of separation."

There is no redemption in *The Lizard's Tail*. It's hardly conceivable in this world. What an adventure it would be to watch Valenzuela apply her wit and her tumbling words to that theme. As it stands, *The Lizard's Tail* is finer than any net that tries to catch it. A brilliant dissection of fascism and paranoia, the novel is perhaps most truly a prayer for strength to face one's demons, individually and collectively.... Lest we forget. ■

Elizabeth Hanley has written for *The Nation*, *The Village Voice* and is at work on a book about the mothers of the disappeared in Argentina.