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“Ideas and Passions”
Approx. 1,365 Words

Ideas and Passions

Woman Who Has Sprouted Wings
Edited by Mary Crow
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I’m one of those readers who has never believed in the reality of “women’s literature.” This isn’t to say that women writers haven’t been grossly under-represented in the anthologies from which our sense of literary tradition derives; and I’m not denying the absurd intellectual foundations upon which so much male-dominated criticism is erected. But it strikes me as wrongheaded to call anything written by a female hand “women’s literature,” when it’s simply either literature or *not* literature. This wrongheadedness has resulted in numerous gatherings of women’s writing — much of it frankly bad writing, but ushered into print because its creators are female. Too often, such books satisfy a sense of social justice at the expense of every serious reader’s longing for literary excellence.

Woman Who Has Sprouted Wings, which presents translations of poems by a variety of

Latin American women, is another case altogether. Editor Mary Crow argues for the importance of this book in an introduction that’s refreshing in a number of ways: first of all, it gives us a good sense of the oppressive social realities Latin American women face when they sit down to write; it secondly provides us a sense of the tradition these writers are working in — a tradition whose greatest exponents have often been exiled or silenced; and finally it makes clear that the poets have been included because they are excellent . . . *and* women. Unlike the book’s preface (by Joanna Bankier, editor of *Women Poets of the World*), Mary Crow’s introduction makes no special pleas based on gender, and it places the burden for the book’s value right where it belongs: on the shoulders of its editor, translators, and authors.

Moving from the introduction to the poems themselves, the first thing one notices is how strong the writing is, how each poet speaks (even through the screen of translation) in a sharply individual voice. Some of the poems address the theme of being female in a machismo-ridden society, but as often as not this theme is simply one aspect of a larger social concern. The picture these poets project is one of individuals crushed by the twin tyrannies of cultural and political oppression. The accent here is on individuals: none of these women write in the bald Philippic tradition of Ernesto Cardenal, for example. Even the most overtly political writer here, the Nicaragua-born Salvadorean poet Claribel Alegría, pays close attention to herself and the world as they are, not as any given dogma might wish them. Here’s an example of her fierce style of witness:

**Little Cambric Tamales
(Makes 4,200,000 tamales)**

*For Eduardo and Helena, who asked me
for a Salvadorean recipe*

Two pounds of mestizo dough
a half-pound of loin of overseer
well-minced and cooked
a box of devout raisins
two tablespoons of Malinche milk
one cup of rabid water
a fry of conquistador helmets
three Jesuit onions
a small bag of multinational gold
two dragon's teeth
one presidential carrot
two tablespoons of political pimps
lard of Panchimalco Indians
two ministerial tomatoes
a half-cup of television sugar
two drops of volcanic lava
seven leaves of *pito*
(don't be dirty-minded: they're somniferous)
put everything to boil
over a slow fire
for five hundred years
and you'll see what a flavor it has!

(tr. Darwin J. Flakoll)

Unless one wants to argue that men don't cook, nothing marks this poem as “women's literature.” It is simply fine writing.

Perhaps because Alegría lives in Spain, her writing is more directly political than that of her contemporaries still living in their native countries. They seem to articulate their political insights more quietly, though no less clearly. Here's how Maria Mercedes Carranza, for example, addresses the South American liberator Simón Bolívar in “From Boyaca in the Country”:

They have stuffed your mouth with straw, Simón,
they have turned you into a statue,
medal, stamp,
and even a bank-note.
Because not all rivers run to the sea,
some end in academies,
on the parchment, in the gilded frames:
that also is death.
But if suddenly, maybe, and unexpectedly,
and if by chance, if perhaps someday you shake off
the rain, the laurels, and so much dust,
who can say.

(tr. Ellen Watson)

Carranza’s tenuous hope must be everywhere in Latin America, for we hear its small, steady note throughout this anthology — particularly in the work of Chilean writer Delia Domínguez and in the haunting poems of Circe Maia, from Uruguay.

It is impossible, of course, to ignore the fact that as women these writers are working in a tradition systematically suppressed for many centuries. There is no answer for such an historical situation, unless the writing itself eventually provides one. And the only way poetry can survive long enough to influence the tradition is if the writers involved bear as clear a witness to their inner lives as to the social realities around them — something these writers certainly do.

In some cases, this witness could be said to address “women’s issues,” as in Rosario Castellanos’s poem “Home Economics.” After six stanzas describing how she’s fixed her home in a way that adheres to “the golden rule, the secret of order: / a place for everything / and everything in its place,” she goes on to list the following exceptions:

But there are some things I just put down here or there
or toss in the place I keep for catchalls.

A few things. A cry, for example,
that was never cried,
a distracting nostalgia,
an ache, a pain whose name was blotted out,
a vow never kept, an anguish
that evaporated like perfume in
a partially closed bottle.

And remnants of time lost anywhere.

This discourages me. I always say, tomorrow . . .
and then forget. And proudly show company
a room that shines with the golden rule
my mother gave me.

(tr. Maureen Ahern)

This may be considered (in the language of this anthology’s author’s note) an instance of Castellanos’s “strong feminism,” but its real power springs from the authenticity of its details and its personal voice.

Generally, the poems in *Woman Who Has Sprouted Wings* express ideas and passions that have no particular gender and no ultimate connection with the political context out of which they emerge. A good example is the work of Alejandra Pizarnik, a Brazilian writer whose hallucinatory poetry deserves to be much more widely known. Here is her poem “Exile”:

This mania to see myself as an angel, ageless
without a death in which to live
without pity for my name
or for my bones which weep wandering.

And who doesn’t have a love?
And who doesn’t feel joy among the poppies?
And who doesn’t possess a fire, a death,

a fear, something horrible
even if it's feathered
even if it comes with smiles?

Sinister delusion to love a shadow.
The shadow doesn't die.
And my love
only embraces what is fluid
as lava from hell:
a silent lodge
ghosts sweetly erect
priest of foam
and above all angels
angels as beautiful as knives
that rise up during the night
and lay waste to hope.

(tr. Lynne Alvarez)

Pizarnik's language seems to spring from somewhere outside her specific culture, from depths where anatomy holds no sway. And the tremendous energy of it survives even the translator's failure (though it may simply be English that fails) to capture the Spanish association of the word “lodge” (*logia*) with Freemasonry, which results in the loss of the subsequent play on the word *erección* (given here as “erect”), which Pizarnik uses for both its sexual and its architectural connotations.

Translation is always problematic, of course, and anyone who reads (or, as in my case, muddles) in two languages can always complain about the solutions. All I have to say on this subject is that Mary Crow has generally fulfilled her obligation to provide us with poems that work — often wonderfully — in English.

In the end, *Woman Who Has Sprouted Wings* does what all anthologies should do: it leaves us wanting more. While most of the 14 writers included are represented by several pages of poems, it is clearly (as Crow admits in her introduction) only a beginning, which other publishers ought to follow up on — with or without the “women’s literature” hook. The extraordinary human achievement of these and other Latin American women poets is surely reason enough. At least we’re entitled to hope so.