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PERSPECTIVES

Woman, in Parts

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In this essay, the text of a craft lecture presented for the Bienvenido Santos Creative Writing Center, I discuss the interrelationship between gender and poetry. I present a close-reading of “Dreamweavers” by Marjorie Evasco, followed by a recital and critical description of five of my own poems. These are organized around specific body parts, by way of critical engagement with the association between femininity and the body.

Keywords: Philippine poetry in English, women’s writing, writing the body, *l’écriture féminine*

There are many ironies in my decision to take on this topic. Obviously, I do not presume to speak for all women, or even most of them; the most I can say is that I have written about my own experiences as they have been shaped by my body and the pervasive ways it is gendered by culture. Nonetheless, there is some sense in saying that I am “unwomanly” in many respects. For one thing, of the Greek goddesses, I identify the most with Athena, springing motherless from the head of her father, symbolizing reason and war. There have been many a philosophy conference when I have embodied the stereotype of the Socratic provocateur, casting aside all notions of verbal finesse you would expect of Filipinos—or women—who dare not say what they really mean, at the expense of hurting or shaming others. In the intellectual arena at least, I feel like I am really myself. My first entry into philosophy was a book about Descartes that I had read in high school, he who doubted the senses and hewed to the power of the self-reflective mind to banish all skeptical doubts. Often, faced with the prospect of household chores or other physical activities, I am only too happy to let others do them, much like any Cartesian trapped in a human body. All these I could easily take in stride, but one thing does bother me from time to time. It is the belief, descending on me now with the inexorability of every birthday, that I will never bear a child. What is disturbing to me is not so much that I long for something I may not have, so much as I don’t seem to long for it at all.

So who am I to write about “woman,” or writing poetry as a woman?

The Irish poet Eavan Boland wrote of the woman poet’s dilemma of being caught between what she calls the Romantic Heresy on the one hand, and the demands of feminist separatism, on the other. The first is the view that there are essentially poetic feelings or ideals that constitute a properly poetic category of literary expression, which of course—as traditionally defined—has excluded the contributions of women (Boland 62). It is no accident that the term “poetess” has been much denigrated, having become a catchword for sentimentality and inhibitedness.¹ For a long time, for one’s work to be categorized as “women’s poetry” is for it to be relegated to the ghetto of poetry that is not proper or serious, or maybe even non-poetry. The second horn of the dilemma, meanwhile, is the view that pre-existing literary traditions must be jettisoned entirely as irredeemably misogynistic (and perhaps we

may add, racist, colonialist, heterosexist, cisgenderist, ablist, speciesist, etc.). This new impulse calls for evolving an alternative female-centered language and artistic criteria (163). The woman poet (or poet-who-is-a-woman?) thus faces a kind of double alienation. Among the poets, she could not be feminine; among the feminists, she could not be a poet.

Fortunately, the force of this dilemma has lessened somewhat as both the poetic tradition and feminist criticism evolved. However, ambivalences still persist, as we can see in the continuing debate about whether there is, properly so-called, a tradition of women’s poetry. As Gill (1) asks, “If poetry by women is disparate and heterogenous, on what grounds do we study it as a distinct strand within the larger poetic genre?” There are two positions on this. Montefiore (72) believes that “There is no *exclusively* female tradition of writing: there are so many and so various women writers that to make ‘female tradition’ equal to ‘all women poets’ is to make the notion so amorphous as to be virtually meaningless.” (She believes, however, that inasmuch as there is a distinction between a poem written by a woman and a feminist poem, it is possible to identify a genre of *feminist* poetry, whose goal is to create feminist meanings that will redefine the existing tradition.) For Ostriker (1986, 9), on the other hand, a tradition of women’s poetry does exist:

For writers necessarily articulate gendered experience just as they necessarily articulate the spirit of a nationality, an age, a language.... I therefore make the assumption that ‘women’s poetry’ exists in much the same sense that ‘American poetry’ exists. It has a history. It has a terrain. Many of its practitioners believe it has something like a language.

In her study of women’s poetry clustered around the theme of embodiment, Ostriker (97) identified “a wide range of representative attitudes or stances regarding bodily experiences, associated with a range of poetic strategies,” including rejection, ambivalence, and celebration, all of which perform the work of literary reinterpretation. Indeed, the possibility of something called “women’s poetry” brings us to the well-known project of *writing the body*, itself fed by a feminist impulse, and primarily associated with the Holy Trinity of French poststructuralist feminism: Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray. Kristeva was the one

who coined the term *l'écriture féminine*, which draws from the energies of the pre-Oedipal phase of psychic development called the semiotic, in contrast to the Oedipal level of the symbolic, which is phallogocentric (Still 269). A necessarily simplistic summary of this controversial theory is that language, as it stands, is premised on the rejection of the unconscious or the feminine Other, which accounts for its bias for masculine-identified reason. Based on this framework are two traditional forms of writing, "writing the mind" and "writing the world": the first involves the transmission of ideas as clearly and as transparently as possible, while the second involves the recording and analysis of facts. It is as an alternative to these forms that Cixous positions the project of writing the body (Still 266). Finally, of the three French difference feminists, Irigaray is the most insistent on the idea of sexual difference, emphasizing a feminine way of being that is based on the multiple possibilities of women's pleasure or *jouissance* (Still 267–68).

Of the project of writing the body, two things may be said. (Arguably, as I articulate these ideas, I am doing the opposite—i.e., writing the mind—but I do so only to be able to go beyond it.)

First, French difference feminism is a response to the historical denigration of the body that can be traced back to Plato all the way to Simone de Beauvoir. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir (35) infamously described women as "the prey of the species," arguing for gender liberation on the basis of biological transcendence. Thus, the post-Beauvoirian feminism of her younger countrywomen marks a schism within the feminist movement itself, as well as a welcome reclamation of the body. The idea is that what has been a site of oppression may also be a site of empowerment.

Second, a problem that continues to dog *l'écriture féminine* is the question of biological essentialism, which is the pernicious view that women share universal characteristics. This obviously denies the great diversity among women in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality, economic class, sexual orientation, and so on. Indeed, even what sounds like such a basic notion as the "female body" may be a construct that obscures the reality of intersex, transgender, and cyborg bodies.

My own solution is to interpret the project of writing the body *metaphorically*, drawing less on the facts of biology than on the social construction of gender. Though the cultural category of gender is inextricable from the notion of biological sex, there

remains a hermeneutic distinction between the two terms, which can be the site of agency. Keeping this distinction in mind, we may now ask what writing the body might look like. I believe that a noteworthy exemplar is Filipina poet Marjorie Evasco's work in her 1987 poetry collection, *Dreamweavers*. I discuss it briefly here also because as my former poetry teacher in the MFA program here in DLSU, she has exerted an enormous influence on me.

Dreamweavers is a distinctive book, easily identifiable from a shelf of books by Filipino poets in the famous La Solidaridad Bookstore in Malate, Manila, due to its spine that is interwoven with purple thread—a personal touch by the author. On its cover are illustrations of patterns from the Itneg sorcerer's blanket, images which recur throughout the pages of the book, featuring such symbolisms as the human eye (the integrated self), the eight-pointed star (the human figure in the pose of childbirth), the spider (the sacred ancestress), and the imploding star (the art of divination). The poems are prefaced by Evasco's open letter to the late American feminist and Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa, who herself had written an open letter addressed to Third World women writers. In her reply letter, Evasco tells the story of her aunts—four of her father's elder sisters—who had sacrificed their own chance at higher education in order to weave the *tikog* and *romblon* mats that sent their brothers to school (Evasco 10). She writes of her own privileges as an educated writer, and how, for a long time, her creative energies had been held back by what she called "the language of exclusion":

This language of exclusion cut up my tongue and my dream life into several separate pieces. It is this language that excludes our foremothers from our books, and continues to push us to the periphery of things, render us invisible, separate us from each other, maim our bodies and our spirits. (11)

Dreamweavers is the poet's response to her own feminist awakening. She has awakened to the devaluation of the body, and the need to listen to its wisdom:

In our writing, we have unearthed the old secret of listening to 'to the words chanting in the body' while we cooked, bent over the vegetable garden, bathed a child, washed clothes, or

taught young women... how to become warriors
and healers. (12–13)

Indeed, the poems in the collection evoke female experience and the female perspective, so much so that, as the critic Isagani R. Cruz notes in a back cover blurb, every poem of Evasco’s “unfolds into a woman. . . . Her words are filled with silences, silences so deep every reader—male or female—turns into a woman.” Of particular note is the titular poem, which integrates into itself the illustrations that recur throughout the book, the story of women’s weaving in the preface, and the poet’s message about women’s capacity to change the world through their craft, whether of writing or of tending to the hearth/earth. A set of elements, nouns, and verbs are woven in three different configurations as the poem makes its argument, beginning with the premise that “We are entitled to our own/ definitions of the worlds/ we have in common. . . .” (Evasco 56). Only the letter “I” differentiates “world” from “word,” and the two terms may as well be interchangeable here. The first configuration evokes the traditional roles of women under a patriarchal order:

earth	house	(stay)
water	well	(carry)
fire stove	(tend)	
air song	(sigh)	
ether	dream	(die)

The second configuration, italicized, emphasizes dynamic changes, and the female capacity to respond to and survive upheavals:

house on fire sing!
stove under water stay,
earth filled well die.

Finally, the last verse presents the poem’s conclusion, a final configuration that hints of female solidarity in the plural pronouns. Through this solidarity and the thoughtful arrangement of decisive action words, the poem shows how women, through their metaphorical weaving, can achieve their dreams:

<i>can</i>	move their earth
<i>must</i>	house their fire
<i>be</i>	water to their song
<i>will</i>	their dreams well.

I don’t believe anything can top the achievement of *Dreamweavers* as women’s poetry *and* feminist poetry. That said, I hope it is not presumptuous of me to discuss my own poems right after my reading of this work.

I did not consciously start out to write a collection that pivots on the theme of “woman,” a word that many are understandably leery of especially when applied as a blanket label for a type of poetry or poetic writing. Nonetheless, as a poet friend once observed of my pieces, there seems to be a palpable female subject in many of them. In fact, of the ones that I had recently written, a good number would seem to be about female experience and the female body, at least enough to justify a collection entitled “Woman, in Parts.”

I have added the phrase “in Parts” to the title of my suite of poems, in order to emphasize the idea of fragmentation. Whereas *Dreamweavers* is the epitome of poetic integration, the exponent of wholeness, as it were, it seems that my own experience reveals a resistance to wholeness, a propensity even to piecemeal analysis. I am self-conscious about these tendencies in my own writing, and I refer to disintegration only with a view to gathering it all together. In any work of transformation, there is a necessary stage of *unraveling*. It is not my intention to glorify a phenomenon which is often the consequence of oppression, or the result of misperception. Rather, I wish to give voice to all those elements that make wholeness possible in the first place. I don’t believe I would be “whole” any time soon, nor do I want to be: It is from of the cracks that I wish to write, the fine fissures that make a well-loved (if not always well-wrought) urn.

As I present these five poems, each dealing with different parts of the body (i.e., the hair, the face, the hands, the womb, and the genitals), I shall read the text of each poem first, and thereafter discuss the creative process behind it.

i. The hair

The Human Sacrifice Was of High Rank and
Had Lovely Hair

Her hair was intact when they exhumed her
from her peat grave, body so well preserved

she would have been known by her friends,
known her by the radial plaits

that looped around the loop they made
at the back of her head. Two-thousand-year-old

strands. In Germania, warriors wore their long,
thin hair in knots, adding to their height.

In firelight, Romans gasped at the shadow
horn, the viper's coil. Though never in battle,

she wore her hair thus, crown they let her keep
unlike her village sister, denuded adulterer.

Even then, shaving was prelude to Shoah.
People knew to lop off the source

of power, lest columns come crashing down.
Hence the snipped locks falling at the feet

of the electric chair, the razing of beauty
along with cancer cells.

When I wrote this one, I had recently read the late Seamus Heaney's poems inspired by the excavation of almost perfectly preserved bodies from peat bogs in Europe, which date back to some 2,000 years ago. Peat bogs have a remarkable capacity to preserve corpses, through what Glob (ix) describes as "the antibiotic action of highly acidic groundwater." In pre-Roman Britain, these watery depressions in the ground were used as burial sites, usually for people who have been executed or who were killed as human sacrifices. In his so-called bog poems, Heaney meditated on the cultural legacies of Celtic culture. Particularly striking for me was his piece entitled "Punishment," in which he imagines the final moments of a woman sentenced to hang due to a social infraction, possibly adultery. "My poor scapegoat,/ I almost love you," he writes, "but would have cast, I know,/ the stones of silence./ I am the artful voyeur/ of your brain's exposed/ and darkened combs,/ your muscles' webbing/ and all your numbered bones...." (Heaney 51). I went to Heaney's source, *The Bog People: Iron Age Man Preserved* by P.V. Glob, in which I came across an image of a girl's head full of hair, which looked as fresh as though she had died yesterday. Glob (82) writes, "The hair was of a darkish blonde color and of luxuriant growth and

plaited into two pig-tails which were coiled up into a crown on top of the head and bound with woolen yarn." She was estimated to have been twenty- to twenty-five years of age when she died, naked, trussed, and covered in two layers of cloth.

For some reason, this image stayed with me a long time. Heaney had nothing to say about the hair of the ancient victims, but for me, the hair is a most substantial marker of identity from among the dead parts of the living body. Men and women spend fortunes dressing and styling their hair, and in my poem I call attention to the ways that it signals status and power. I refer to human sacrifices in legend and history, from Samson to Holocaust victims to death row inmates, who all went through the ritual of having their locks snipped off. When I was child, my mother insisted on keeping my hair short, and there was many I time when I cried unabashedly as I sat on the barber's chair. Having been shorn is a peculiar feeling, as though something vital has been lost. In my poem, I echo Heaney's reference to the tribal impulse to punish women for fear of their sexual power and beauty. But instead of identifying with the spectators, as Heaney does, I identify with the nameless young woman exhumed from the peat grave, known now only by her hair.

ii. The face

To The Woman Who Once Lost Her Face

Since finding it again, you've realized
it was simpler to lend it to random objects:
the seaweed masque that peels away,
the portrait that has stolen your soul.
Since then you've wanted to know what anchors
it
when you put it on, if behind the persona
is another persona, the only way to tell the story.
Put a face to it, they say, make it human.
Keyholes that eyeball you and the unsmiling
slot of the mailbox are not human. Nonetheless
we have a special faculty for seeing faces,
which are wont to hide in the plain-speaking
of sewer covers, the composition of two
windows
above a yawning doorway. Online, the prosthetics
of emoticons, and at times, the moon itself is
beaming.

What you really want is someone else's point of view.

To see yourself and be yourself, not this epiphenomenon of mirrors, hologram of other people's opinions. You want to wear a character that can't be snatched away, of more substance than paper masks the Greeks held up.

Such contrapositions of tragedy and comedy!
It must mean something when corners of your lips
are turned down. You turn them up anyway.

Another deeply symbolic part of the body is the face. The face represents the self-in-terms-of-others. One cannot really see one's own face except through the mirror of other people's gaze. And inasmuch as one has no ultimate control over others' opinions, it doesn't feel like the face belongs to oneself. It is slippery and insubstantial; it can be lost, just like that.

The example of what we aptly call *Facebook* is instructive. Our social media account is our virtual persona, whose status is measured by the likes we generate. It has come to the point that the "likes" have become their own reason for posting anything at all, rather than the incidental offshoot of posting something because it is worth sharing. You don't even have to be on *Facebook* to understand or experience this phenomenon. Even without the Internet, human beings are by nature self-conscious. Rightly or wrongly, we care about what others think.

Women, especially, are socialized to live their lives in terms of others' expectations or needs, often at the cost of being true to themselves. There is the unspoken rule that a woman must smile even when she feels like snarling; she must fit in and not rock the boat, even when she feels like exploding. Perhaps this is why culture has fetishized the archetype of the mysterious woman. The ability to automatically don an inscrutable Mona Lisa smile is considered a feminine skill. Yet there is a price to pay for all this pretense, as I've tried to articulate in this poem.

Here, the persona (literally the persona!) meditates on the experience of past humiliation and subsequent recovery, after which she has come to question her sense of who she is. Her search leads her to see faces in inanimate objects. Women, especially, have a knack for reading faces, socialized as they are to resort to empathy as a survival strategy. Yet this is a draining task; at the end of the day, one feels emptied out. The

last lines evoke the predicament of the actor in a play, one who has confused her identity with the role. This is a tragic play that women often reenact.

iii. *The hands*

I, Witch

"They were sick with longing for their hands, those appendages men use to mitigate the world."—Madeline Miller, *Circe*

Let us begin with hands. They say
I have deprived the men who drank my brew
of their means of shaping the world. I think
the cloven hooves are an improvement,
grounding them as they root for the unexpected
pleasure of a truffle. Consider the tentacles
that sprang from the nymph they say
I had been jealous of, her many-headed
out-of-body experience, her incisors
grown the length of a leg. Do we not deserve
to become what we are? This is the secret
my fingers seek, smelling of herbs. I am
a specialist of transformation, urging women
to push harder, counting the digits and toes
of their labor. I am purveyor of bottled hopes.
Mind you, the spells can be exacting, calling for
the right words when there are never any.
I admit, sometimes it is all guesswork,
the business of how to rhyme and where to cut.
One day they will invent stainless steel
and antiseptic, and I will gain an array
of metonymies, a stethoscope to eavesdrop
on your heart. It can always tell what's wrong:
Oracular blockage, fated rupture. I am
a convenient one to blame. Perhaps people
would always chant and cheer around me,
amidst the flames. Know this. Only hands
have ever burned the world.

This third poem was a response to a writing prompt on *Facebook* which challenged me to reclaim something that has traditionally been devalued. At the time, I was reading a novel by Madeline Miller entitled *Circe*, which is her retelling of the story of the sorceress who became Odysseus's lover, after she had transformed his sailors into pigs and then been persuaded to transform them back.

The witch is vilified in patriarchal culture, in comparison to the mage who is venerated for his wisdom. Embodying everything that a superstitious society cannot deal with or integrate, the witch had burned at the stake. The irony is that before she had been demonized, she held a high position as an oracle, or our local equivalent of the *babaylan*, in pre-Christian cultures.

In my poem, I portray the witch as a necessary agent of transformation. Her craft has a science to it—after all, as Paul Feyerabend contended, science *is* witchcraft! In Homer’s account, Circe liked to transform individuals into animals or monsters, as when she turned a nymph into the many-headed creature, Scylla, supposedly out of spite. The untold story that Miller reveals is that Circe’s magic only works to externalize one’s inner nature, hence the line, “... Do we not deserve/ to become what we are?” Perhaps witchcraft succeeds because it involves alignment with nature, rather than domination over it. Margaret Atwood’s version of Circe in her eponymous cycle of poems suggests that this gift is characteristically feminine. According to Lauter (72),

Atwood has put her finger on a significant aspect of woman’s power that was embodied in the ancient figure of Circe and needed only to be articulated clearly: the ability to see, see into, and see beyond the stories we tell about who we are.

Hands play a crucial role in the work of transformation. In fact, part of the reason why humans have evolved the type of brain that they have has to do with tool use. When the witch uses her hands, it is comparable to the work of the poet (the Greek word *poiesis* means “to create” or “to make”). Hence the following deliberately ambiguous lines: “Mind you, the spells can be exacting, calling for/ the right words when there are never any./ I admit, sometimes it is all guesswork,/ the business of how to rhyme and where to cut.” The ending of the poem reminds us that, much like any made thing, the events of history—even and especially the most atrocious—are brought about by humans rather than by supernatural forces.

iv. The womb

A Poem About A Painting by Edvard Munch
That Isn’t *The Scream*

What were you thinking when he arranged you
in that all-too-familiar pose, assumed by
countless

women down the years, composition of half-
closed lids and almost-smile? The downward

slant of your eyes made the picture seem
seen from below, viewpoint of the man

you were looking down on. Or was he looking
down on you, splayed naked on his bed?

Did he want to know if it was good for you?
Or did you just want to sleep? How much energy

does your halo require, burning through
canvasses

you enter, silent till the final cataclysm?

In 1883, the Krakatau exploded, bloodying the
sky,
rumored inspiration for the undulating waves

in his famed portrait of open-mouthed terror.
You, on the other hand, are serene,

perhaps even when your stomach rumbles.
I imagine bubbles on the surface, the tension

of their domes splintering in shower of blood.
O monthly ejecta! On a lost frame, he painted

the swimming sperm, the huddled fetus.
And you, the sublime supine in the center of
it all.

What were you thinking? The gaze, the unsolved
mystery, the scream, belong to him.

*After Madonna by Edvard Munch, 1894–95, oil
on canvas*

This poem is my personal favorite. It is one of those pieces that I consciously envisioned and did meticulous research for. The irony is that I had originally planned to write an ekphrastic piece not on Edvard Munch's *Madonna*, but on *The Scream*—or at least, the most well-known version of it that hangs in the National Gallery in Oslo, Norway. Over the past summer break, I had the incredible opportunity to see it for myself, when I went to Oslo with my sister and her partner. *The Scream* is probably the most recognizable painting after *The Mona Lisa*. It depicts a wide-eyed and open-mouthed figure on the foreground, set against a horizon of undulating orange and red waves. The sheer anguish on the face, and the screech you almost hear in your head, are unforgettable. Before heading to the museum, I had already decided to write a poem that would extend the story of the screamer beyond the frame of the painting.

However, in the course of reading about Munch's decidedly neurotic life, a minor character jumped out at me, the Norwegian writer Dagny Juel. She was the model for many of Munch's paintings, including *Madonna*, which initially appeared unremarkable to me. (Just another nude seen from the male gaze, I thought.) Born into an upper-middle-class family in Kristiana, Norway, the 25-year-old Dagny came to Berlin and joined Munch's intellectual and artistic circle, which included the playwright Auguste Strindberg and the Polish writer Stanisław Przybyszewski, who is later to become her husband. Everyone was enamored of her immediately. According to Munch's biographer, Sue Prideaux,

Dagny... took [the men] by the arm familiarly, smoked cigarette for cigarette with them, told them risqué stories and she drank legendary quantities of absinthe without showing any ill effects. She had completely white hands; her androgynous and ethereally fleshless qualities were commented on by many, as was her smile, which obviously had a powerful effect in conjunction with the rather ascetic appearance. It was the combination of intelligence, spirituality, inviolability, and sensuality that comprised her fascination. (Prideaux 160)

It seemed that the men had a love-hate relationship with her, however. Munch and his best friend Strindberg became rivals for her affection. After his short fling with her ended, Strindberg ranted maniacally

about her in his letters, using her as a model for the evil female characters in his misogynistic plays. Her husband was not to treat her any better, cheating on her and physically abusing her. He was even alleged to have colluded with Władysław Emeryk in her murder. Emeryk, who was the couple's benefactor as well as Dagny's lover, shot her in the head while she was asleep in their hotel room, then turned the gun on himself. She died three days before her thirty-fourth birthday.

Like many intellectual women who hung on the arm of famous artists, Dagny was better known for her colorful personal life than her own creative works. Curious as to what she could possibly have been thinking, given her life choices, I tried to find out more about her and her writings. Unfortunately, what little information there is comes from other people's biographies, and so she remained an obscure figure to me.

Her very mystery brought me back to Munch's *Madonna*, an unusual depiction of the haloed lady, since she is topless in this one and has a heavy-lidded expression. I tried to reconstruct a story that she herself was either unable to tell, or refrained from telling. The title of my poem alludes to two paintings, making it a double ekphrasis. My interpretation of one painting has implications for the meaning of the other. By reading Dagny, I was psychoanalyzing Munch, so to speak, thereby interpreting *The Scream* in terms of his unconscious fear of the ungovernable female. Tellingly, he once painted the original frame for *Madonna*—now lost—with the figure of a fetus and swimming sperm. Framed against these images, the woman personifies the womb, where we all came from and to which, perhaps, we also long to return. From the point of view of patriarchal culture, the fact of women having a womb is frightening. Its power has to be controlled somehow, whether through sexual double standards designed to protect patrilineal integrity, or through stereotypes of female irrationality—what is called *hysteria*—intended to ridicule or dismiss that which is feared. Then there is also some scholars' speculation that Munch's depiction of the sky in *The Scream* may have been inspired by news of how the 1883 explosion of the Krakatau volcano in Indonesia had turned the heavens red. An image came to me of menstrual blood, linked to the well-known premenstrual syndrome that supposedly transforms otherwise serene women into raging dragons. Might this be what Munch had feared? Unfortunately, all we hear is his scream, and her silence.

v. *The genitals*

The Day of The Three Thousand Flowers

And though it is a twelfth of a teaspoon,
the sum of all honey she gathers
in her lifetime of a few weeks—

collecting pollen or nectar
from her solitary votaries,
legion of immobile virgins

yielding to her tongue, relinquishing
the bloom of their desires
to her who has wings

(among the vulgar flowers, not a one
could touch each other or themselves!)—
it is abundant. She soars over

the scent of longing, buzzing to a rhythm
she set for herself, choreographer
of round or waggle dance.

For her sisters, she charts the path
with the sextant of her thorax,
telling others of the fervid spring.

This fifth and last poem was composed during a period of lingering illness. Last year, I caught the flu, and thereafter developed these coughing fits that lasted far longer than any I've experienced. Feeling ill for a prolonged period had me thinking about the frailty of my body, and how much I had taken for granted when I was healthy. I realized then that what I really wanted in life were the simplest things—to be able to read books and write poetry. Unfortunately, such supposedly simple things required not feeling dizzy long enough to stay conscious and focused, which I couldn't even manage most of the time.

To ease the coughing fits, I started putting honey in my tea. And somehow that got me thinking about the life of honeybees. Worker honeybees, all of whom are female, live only a few weeks, during which time they do the busywork of feeding the nymphs in the hive or harvesting pollen or nectar for the colony's food supply. The amount of honey a single honeybee produces in her life—by ingesting nectar and mixing it

with enzymes in her body—comes to about one-twelfth of a teaspoon. They can travel as far as nine kilometers from their hive and, on a single day, pollinate as many as three thousand flowers! Truly, without honeybees, an entire ecosystem could collapse. Thus, I wrote an ode praising the sexual fervor with which they assist the germination of spring. The passive, pretty flower is often likened to women, but I think a better simile is the honeybee. She is the ultimate celebration of life, which, no matter how short, is infinitely sweet.

Notes

¹ See, however, Finch's (2008, 126) bold defense of the poetess and her argument that her sensibility anticipates the postmodern mode of expression: "... this most accessible and familiar-seeming of literary styles can be quite satisfying to those who are fed up with assumptions of integrated subjectivity, reliance on language's unmediated naturalness, imperialistic appropriations of the externalized natural world, self-centered accounts of self-transformation—all the workshop-worn baggage of post-post-Romanticism."

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