

Book Review: *Women in Praise of the Sacred* edited by Jane Hirshfield

I have always felt like the reed flute from one of Rumi's¹ poems:

Since I was cut from the reed bed,
I have made this crying sound.

When I am quiet, I try to listen to the words of that cry within myself; and it is this cry that has led me to write poems infused with the spiritual and to continually try to find poetry that does the same.

In perusing the poetry section of a local bookstore, I found this remarkable collection of women poets, spanning forty-three centuries and many different cultures. The anthology presents women who express their awakening to, and awareness of, the Divine Presence. In essence, they have kept alive the language of the soul, and my own soul leapt within me as I read in the preface that "[t]he pieces found here express the sacred as a living presence in human life—even in those poems that long for union or mourn its absence . . ." These are poems that hear that very same cry of the reed.

The poems come from the gamut of the world's religions: Christian, Buddhist, indigenous, Taoist, to name but a few. However, it's interesting to note that the majority of the works use the natural world to express the spiritual. As the centuries progress, the language becomes more complex, and many poems become longer and their imagery denser.

In inviting the Divine Presence to dwell near, or within one's self, Sappho integrated the natural world into her expression:

Leave Crete,
Aphrodite,

¹ Rumi was a 13th century Persian poet and teacher of Sufism. He founded the Mevlevi order, also known as the Whirling Dervishes.

and come to this
sacred place
encircled by apple trees, fragrant with
offered smoke.

Her poem is filled with the beauty of nature, from "wildflowers of spring" to "the ground is shady with roses." This place is ripe with longing and expectation of a union. The Shulammitte, the woman of Song of Songs, also invites the Divine to dwell with her, and uses the imagery of fields, vineyards, pomegranates, and "flowering henna" to convey her own readiness for union:

Come, my beloved,
Let us go out into the fields
And sleep all night among the flowering
henna.

The idea that the Divine is both Nothing and Everything, Nowhere and Everywhere, is a paradox that finds expression in several poems and crosses cultures and centuries. Zi Ye, a Chinese poet living in the 6th century BCE, writes of her spiritual awakening in this short poem:

All night I could not sleep
because of the moonlight on my bed.
I kept on hearing a voice calling:
Out of Nowhere, Nothing answered "yes."

The concept that G-d² is Nothing can also be found in Judaism, where the Gnostic writers have their roots. By using paradox, the Divine is

² I follow the Jewish Mystical tradition of not using the personal name of God, which was meant never to be uttered aloud. Even today, Jews substitute Adonai, another name for God, whenever they encounter YHVH, which English-speakers write and pronounce as Yahweh.

described: "I am the honored one, and the scorned. / I am the whore and the holy one." "The Thunder: Perfect Mind" from the Gnostic Gospel goes on to express Divine awareness simply and with directness that is itself indirect:

You praise me and you whisper against me.
You who have been defeated,
judge before you are judged:
the judge and all judging exist inside you.
For what is inside you is what is outside you,
and the one who formed you on the outside
is the one who shaped you within.

The natural world allegorizes the Divine in most of the Asian poems, whereas nature is used to express aspects of the Divine, or to set the scene for the Divine, in the other works. Kojiju, a Japanese Buddhist nun writing at the end of the 12th century, shows spiritual awakening from within:

Merely to know
The Flawless moon dwells pure
In the human heart
Is to find the Darkness of the night
Vanished under clearing skies.

After describing the hidden pleasures within the things of the world, like sapphires within the earth and "sweetness in fruit," Makadeviyakka, a 12th century Indian bhakti poet, explains: "Like these, / the Infinite / rests concealed in the heart." Writing plainly and frankly, Hadewijch II, a 13th century Flemish poet, also explains how the Divine already is within one's self:

You who want
knowledge,

seek the Oneness
within

There you
will find
the clear mirror
already waiting

Emily Dickinson, too, expresses that which has always existed, here and now:

The Infinite a sudden Guest
Has been assumed to be—
But how can that stupendous come
Which never went away?

The longing to be at-one with the Divine and the poets' expressing the Divine Presence as a feminine one speak to my own soul. Arranged chronologically, I encountered Christian mystics, such as Hildegard of Bingen and Teresa of Avila, along side Hindu poets, such as Lalla and Mirabai, and each poem, each poet, took me into the Divine center that is neither within nor without. Even the poet Anna Akhmatova expressed that Presence despite her despair and suffering under Stalin: "And everything is mother- / Of-pearl and jasper, / But the light's source is a secret."

"Spiritual experience is fundamental to human life," Hirshfield explains in the Preface. This volume reminds us all of our spiritual origins and desires, and I turn to it for inspiration, not just to live a spiritual life, but also to experience the Divine within my everyday existence.