

EDITORIAL

Before the poet laureate of West Virginia, Irene McKinney, passed away last February, I sat down to talk with her about her life. For the thirty years that I knew her, McKinney was by far the most driven, dare I say, *possessed* writer I had ever met. And really, she had no choice. She had to claw her way to the life she longed for – a life that so many women artists now take for granted – with an almost ruthless will, an ambition that in her early years left her feeling guilty and full of self doubt.

She was born to a world and to a generation that had zero expectations of women doing anything even mildly interesting or challenging with their lives. “The women who fought their way up out of that,” she told me, “did so against a blank space. It wasn’t that people said, ‘You can’t do that’, it was just like an invisible wall.”

From a very early age, the printed word had bitten and infected her. But she soon butted up against the reality for women in 1950s Appalachia. Cultural expectations crept through her like a virus. By age 17 she was married. They were poor, and soon they had two more mouths to feed. The very idea that she might one day attend college, something no one in her family had ever done, seemed ludicrous. She began to write in the small hours to save her life.

So what kept her going? Just who made her think she could become a serious poet? Certainly not the all-male literary voices of the day. Voices like Theodore Roethke, who once complimented Louise Bogan for escaping the horrors of ‘women’s poetry’ by “circumventing the embroidering of trivial themes; a concern with the mere surfaces of life [...] hiding from the real agonies of the spirit [...] stamping a tiny foot against God [...] lamenting the lot of the women; caterwauling; writing the same poem about fifty times”.

And certainly not her husband who reacted with bafflement at McKinney’s desire to stretch beyond her cultural confinement. At the beginning she was influenced by reading Denise Levertov. Here was a startling anomaly: a woman who dared to define herself as a poet! Poetry, it seemed, was the very center of her life. Like McKinney, Levertov was married and had a child. This was a crucial linchpin: that there existed a woman poet who also had an emotional and marital

life, that domestic details of that life were ‘allowed’ to be included in one’s work, and that this could be taken seriously.

Sexism was no stranger to women in general or to women writers in particular in the 1950s and 1960s. Elizabeth Bishop made it a strict policy not to appear in all-female anthologies. It was her contention that if women were to be taken seriously they could not allow themselves to be compartmentalized. When Katherine Anne Porter was asked what she thought of “the woman question”, she remarked, “Oh, *that*, I think women and men have their feet nailed to the same deck.”

Well, yes and no. Does culture affect what we write? Invariably. McKinney’s predecessors like Bogan and Bishop found not only acceptance, but actual acclaim in a world that saluted their genderless voice. In seeking for her own voice, Irene McKinney absorbed what now seemed ‘permitted’ by these new pioneers. In one powerful stroke, voices like those of Levertov and Plath condoned her own small domestic life and granted huge validation for who she was.

But there came other problems for women who defined themselves as poets. The label of “confessionalism” stuck and tainted women poets like an indelible tattoo for years in a way it never did their male counterparts. Theodore Roethke’s famous poem, “My Papa’s Waltz”, ostensibly about his father, never blighted, compartmentalized, or trivialized his oeuvre. No one ever said, that is a “specifically male experience”.

And in a way, the blight sticks to women still. As late as 2010, in an albeit overwhelmingly positive review, the UK’s *Independent* places the work of Costa Book of the Year award winner, Jo Shapcott, in a familiar culturally confining trap of assumptions.

Once, poetry’s radical new mode was confessionalism and, for women poets, the politically significant foregrounding of their own stories. Now the search is on for meta-narratives [...] How to keep the autobiographical self under control but within touching distance seems to be [Shapcott’s] underlying challenge.¹

¹ Carol Rumens. Rev. of *Of Mutability* by Jo Shapcott and *Rough Music* by Fiona Sampson. *The Independent* 20 August 2010.
<<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/of-mutability-by-jo-shapcottbr-rough-music-by-fiona-sampson-2056878.html>>.

A glowing review is almost more dangerous than a cool one. It is sexism hiding in plain sight, even from the reviewer herself. (Yes, in this case, the reviewer is not only a woman, but also a poet.) So deep are the vestiges of sexism that they exceed the inadequacies of vocabulary. Even if Shapcott's collection, *Of Mutability*, was 'emotionally informed' by her battle with breast cancer, several of the poems by her own admission are fictions. One, "Procedure", deals graphically in medical terms. "... with a bump / in my case, takes me back to the yellow time / of trouble with bloodtests, and cellular / madness, and my presence required / on the slab for surgery ...". Here she speaks about that poem in an interview,

In the first draft [...] I looked up a complicated sounding operation [...] but it wasn't an operation I'd had. So I was imagining someone else [...] The events [of an experience] are less interesting to me. And I like being able to make those up. I really envy novelists because readers don't assume that the "I" in the novel is the novelist. But they really want to assume that of poets.²

And nearly always of women poets. We hope much has changed since Bogan's and Bishop's day. The term "women's poetry" thankfully now rings regressive and old-fashioned. All great poems are great because they link us to the universal; because what is true for the voice in the poem also rings true inside of us. Plath's "Daddy" seems the perfect example. As J. Allyn Rosser in *Poetry Magazine* put it, "in a thrillingly complicated voice Plath expresses a compellingly complicated version of oppression and a version of the human response to it."³ The poem works not because it *is* confessional, but because it *mimics* the confessional.

Young poets working today have the advantage of putting to shame Simone de Beauvoir's old adage that "man is defined as a human being and a woman as female."

² "Costa prize-winner Jo Shapcott on the joys of invention". Video interview by Sarah Crown. *The Guardian* 27 January 2011.

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/video/2011/jan/27/jo-shapcott-costa-mutability-video>>.

³ "Meghan O'Rourke, J. Allyn Rosser & Eleanor Wilner on 'Women's Poetry'". *Poetry Magazine* January 2006.

<<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/article/176532>>.

In this issue of *PSR*, we find Anne Harding Woodworth holding the mantle of history in “Krakow’s Bugler” (p. 146), (“... what if the bugler were to jump / out of the tower and glide into a world // where he could play and finish whatever tune he wanted?”), while Brian Aldiss in “Creatures in Snow” (pp. 14-15) invokes the deep lyricism of the natural world, (“The thrush / Was here, a squarrel with its brush / Swept by this bush.”), and Sally Bayley reinvents the mythical world of Ophelia (“Ophelia Senses a Funeral”, pp. 136-137) (“She ran at / them with flowers, / hoping that, / at the sight of her, / History would / shut tight and forget / everything”).

We may feel blessed to have evolved to a time when gender no longer halts the tongue ... except, of course, when we look toward our sisters in the Mideast. When we hear of horrific ‘honor killings’ in Afghanistan, or incomprehensible shootings of teenage girls in Pakistan who ask only for an education, we breathe a global sigh of despair. As a friend reminded me, when you place plant cuttings in two different rooms, they still respond to each other. On page 120 of this issue, Cristina Godoroja informs us: “When we sleep or keep silent, / the words grow like the leaves on the tree. / When you are quiet, / willows grow on me / and crickets sing on my tongue.” These prescient poets remind us, if one of us is silenced, can either of us be free?

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