

Elsa Cross

Also by Elsa Cross

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Elsa Cross

S e l e c t e d P o e m s

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INTRODUCTION

Some twelve years ago, I found myself living in Mexico City, a fascinating, vibrant and enormous city, and one which I don't think I ever really came to grips with during an eighteen-month stay. A previous period in Latin America had already led me to read a good deal of poetry from Chile as well as classics of the 20th-century *vanguardia*, but Mexico remained almost a closed book, apart from the towering figure of Octavio Paz, and the mid-century genius of Xavier Villaurrutia—both familiar thanks to bilingual editions edited and translated by the indefatigable Eliot Weinberger. While in Mexico I hunted through bookshops wherever I went but, while these yielded some discoveries, the picture of contemporary Mexican poetry remained opaque. Some anthologies here and there helped, mostly from the USA, and also some pan-Latin American anthologies, but it later became abundantly clear—thanks largely to the *Reversible Monuments* anthology¹—that there was an extraordinary amount of fine poetry being written in Mexico, and that women poets—of whom I had seen little trace in the Mexican bookshops—were in the very forefront of what appeared to be a major generation of writers in the wake of Paz. It would of course not be the first time that women poets had been less noticeable than their male counterparts, although here I am really referring to their visibility to an outsider: it is clear that, within Mexico, the women poets that I was now reading so avidly were receiving significant awards, were being translated, and were widely admired. Elsa Cross, the subject of this volume, won the Aguascalientes National Poetry Prize in 1989, the Jaime Sabines International Poetry Prize in 1992, and in 2007 shared the prestigious Xavier Villaurrutia Prize with Pura López-Colomé, a prize esteemed for the fact that the judges are themselves writers: it is thus an award from the

¹ *Reversible Monuments: Contemporary Mexican Poetry*, Eds. Mónica de la Torre & Michael Wiegers. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2002.

writer's peers, and, in Elsa Cross' case, it was in honour of a fine new collection from the excellent small press Aldus, *Cuaderno de Amorgós* (Notebook of Amorgos), from which the final poem in this volume has been drawn.

Born in 1946, Elsa Cross has a doctorate in Philosophy and teaches the Philosophy of Religion and Comparative Mythology at Mexico City's National Autonomous University. It might be too easy to draw connections between the author's professional career and her poetic career, but it is clear that the two interpenetrate to a significant degree. India, and its religions and myths, played a significant part in her work in the 1970s and 1980s, above all in the long poems *Baniano* (Banyan Tree) and *Canto malabar* (Malabar Canto—from which the first three sections are printed here). In her more recent work, Greece—both ancient and modern—appears and reappears, and throughout her career the shadow of Mexico's pre-Columbian past, with its startling myths and magnificent ruins, rises to the surface. The poems from *Jaguar*—a totemic animal for the Mesoamerican peoples—in this volume demonstrate this latter strain in her work. As with all fine poets, however, Elsa Cross' work is not *about* India, Greece, or ancient Mesoamerica: the poet meditates in a space created by these cultures and creates a new reality, a new myth, even, that has resonance for today. It is often a deeply metaphysical poetry, as befits a student and teacher of philosophy, but it is also a poetry of dazzling surfaces and imagery.

Readers used only to Anglo-American poetry will find much here that is strange at first sight, for contemporary Hispanic poetry has a heritage that is quite dissimilar to the Anglo-American, having its roots in symbolism and surrealism, and also a type of modernism that is subtly different from the classic Atlantic variety. Also, where many contemporary Anglo-American poets seem to distrust the grand gesture and the oracular voice—perhaps out of a misplaced embarrassment—modern Hispanic poets are frequently able to use these with great aplomb. Thus it is that Elsa Cross' poetry can interrogate reality from a skewed perspective that seems quite alien to one sitting in a chair in England, but it is an alien perspective that I find liberating, in the way that it gives

one new eyes with which to see. For, despite the metaphysical nature of much of her work, Elsa Cross' work is rooted in an empirical reality, even when it appears to be loosening its ties to the world as we know it, and to be ascending into a mythic realm. Elsa Cross is a poet who takes wing, flies over our reality, looking down at the landscape one moment, surveying the clouds and infinity the next. This is indeed a poetry that can teach us how to see anew, and I firmly believe that it is one that we need.

My thanks go to Elsa Cross for her support of this project, and to the five translators who gave of their time to help make it come to fruition.

Tony Frazer
Exeter, 2009

BACCHANTES

Man! Ah, Ariadne!

He played his flute and music led his steps

Apollinaire, *The Musician from Saint-Merry*

I

We submerged ourselves in the spring.
We left our bodies to the current
like straying sandbanks,
a land that falls away
carrying off the shore of bulrushes.
We flowed through its transparencies
and in the depth of its bed
our legs brushed against a soft moss.
Plants entwined our feet.
We felt the passing of those fish
that, by accident, so they said,
would cling amid the women's thighs.
And always a phrase in my ear
sounding its highest cadences at the edge.
Downstream we saw branches against the sky.
The sun sketched on our bodies
the shadow of leaves.
The breeze brought your scent.
We passed under a willow
and its branches held back by our hair
all that drive downriver.

II

Surrounded by hills like walls
the men were playing on the terraces.
Din of racing on the grass.
A purple blue in the air when the sun set.
The birds were becoming quiet.
The bats were erratically taking flight.
The men were keen to score in the game.
Their shouts reverberated amid the hills.
Ovation.

They raised you on their shoulders,
they carried you downhill to celebrate.
At every entrance of that village, a church.
The seven doors protected by the archangels,
so they said.

And ours got drunk in the arcades of the square,
talking of heaven and hell
as places separated by two inches
inside the body.

III

Nothing of your blessed prestiges.
The women were anticipating your coming, like an advent,
and you arrived with marijuana in your pockets,
your hair messed up,
just out of who knows what escapades—
And you had some queries to answer
like to the Queen of Sheba.
You smiled to see them so devout,
your milk sisters,
and like Shiva in the Pine Wood
unfolding a great phallus
you seduced them right under their husbands' beards,
the ascetics.
And the women followed you.
No curse reached you,
O Smoker-of-Intoxicating-Herbs.
Above, mirror signals in the branches.
The tranquil earth, waiting,
like a day of great festivity.
And there the Concheros went
with their flutes and mournful drums,
their hawk-bells of dry seeds.
Dance of mirrors under the sun.
In the district of the Cross rockets thundered.
From the poles they had hung coloured flags.
The people drunk in the streets
were moving in staggering processions
on the point of falling on the uneven cobblestones.
At night sparklers,
your mirrors of smoke.
Rockets rumbling like gunshots.
People fond of fire.
In so many places we found

mouldy bullet cartridges,
gunpowder burns in the walls.
The children puffed at the toy windmills,
they puffed at the flowers
sending up their petals on the wind.
The women followed you.

IV

On the edge of the ravine we awaited the night.

Did not the Conquistadors run their eyes
over that valley at our feet?

Lights began to be switched on
and our minds were being switched off,
since the vigil opened its spider womb,
its white goddesses.

We satiated ourselves on wines and odours.

And every night an acid test,
like the Bards on deserted peaks
strenuously holding atrocious and divine
threats.

Not knowing if we would leave alive that tunnel,
that night turned toward nothingness.

We let the sweetest wines
slip down our throats.

We satiated ourselves on honeys.
And at the height of night
the unheard-of grace of your body.

The world closed over our heads,
lost itself in the rain.

We forgot to mind our children,
like Bacchantes,
we forgot our homes.

The rain was a fiesta on the mountain.

And who could predict his own fulmination?

Open transgression.

Such fright,

Such beauty creating an emptiness around
sucked us like the eye of a storm.

And you took to my delight.

We follow you in the descent to your caverns.

And in the depth there were only

legs of insects brushing our back,
butterfly wings.
And the fertile goddess
smothering us against her humid womb.
Lightning struck,
thunders rolled through the sky
from the crest of the hills to no one's spot.
We walked almost on air,
as though walking through a minefield.
And an explosion brought us so much glory.

V

From village to village with stained clothes,
hair to the wind,
we ate, O gods, your soma
mushrooms all covered in dirt.
We were under the volcano
watching life being destroyed.
Danger on all the roads.
We made fires out of dung
to drive such chill from our bones.
O, mother cows,
Our bed of dung.
The earth trembled.
That day the bulls killed men in the bullring.
And from high up
the sun was fire,
our bodies oblation,
prayer
those cicadas on the point of dying.
And those drops about to fall on the earth
I receive them.
From the height we looked at the valley
and you were asking for fruit.
The clefts in the mountain, the crevices
made the wind sing.
That day the swallows were returning
looking for their nests at the height of the crag.
We saw their signs.