

THE MOMENT OF CHANGE

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An Anthology of Feminist Speculative Poetry
edited by **R.B. Lemberg**



Published by Aqueduct Press
PO Box 95787
Seattle, WA 98145-2787
www.aqueductpress.com

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Publishing histories provided in Acknowledgements.

First Printing, May 2012
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN: 978-1-61976-006-6

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012935514

Cover illustrations courtesy Terri Windling
Front cover: The Spirit of Sabino Canyon
Back cover: Detail from The Spirit of Air
www.terriwindling.com

Book Design by Kathryn Wilham

Printed in the USA by Applied Digital Imaging

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Introduction

R.B. Lemberg

the mind of the poet is the only poem [...]
the mind of the poet is changing
the moment of change is the only poem.

(Adrienne Rich, "Images for Godard,"
from *The Will to Change*)

We seek out change to dream ourselves into the world. But even though we are in the world, our voices are folded into the creases. We speak from memory of stories told sidewise. We speak from pain; is that serious enough? The world has not been welcoming, but what other world is there?

Literature of the fantastic allows us to create worlds and visions of society, origins, social justice, and identity. As such, it is directly relevant to feminism; and of all the genres of speculative literature, poetry is crucial. In the words of Audre Lorde,

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. [...] Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.¹

But it is not enough for our voices to simply exist; poets writing from marginalized perspectives must also find venues sympathetic to their work, spaces in which to be heard and engage with their readership. And yet, conversations about speculative feminist poetry have

been frustratingly rare, even though major figures have pioneered the field and produced powerful work.

The mythic poetry movement has been central to the emerging body of diverse feminist engagement in a field previously dominated by other perspectives. Terri Windling and Midori Snyder's *Journal of the Mythic Arts* published poetry and articles with a strong feminist bent; Amal El-Mohtar and Jessica Paige Wick, editors of *Goblin Fruit*, contributed to the maturation of the movement by providing an explicitly feminist outlet for mythic and folkloric work; Mike Allen, the editor of *Mythic Delirium* and Mythic anthologies, showcased multiple perspectives, including but not limited to feminist poetry. In the late 2000s, the mythic poetry movement truly came into its own; poets working in this tradition won the Rhysling Award with diverse feminist work.

And yet, conversations within the field of speculative poetry have often downplayed or ignored these voices, while claiming that diversity in the speculative realm is rare to nonexistent.

In Summer 2010, I started a new venue, *Stone Telling* (now co-edited with my partner in crime, Shweta Narayan). I wanted to showcase diverse voices and multiple perspectives not just in the mythic tradition, but across genres. Setting out, I was curious as to what has been already done in the field vis-a-vis representing the voices and narratives of women and outsiders. I found multiple anthologies of speculative poetry, but not a single one labeled itself feminist, or even focused on women's creativity in this domain. A vast majority of these anthologies have been edited by men.

I did find the brilliant *Women of Other Worlds*, a feminist anthology which came out in 1999; the mission of the editors Helen Merrick and Tess Williams is in many ways aligned with my own stated interest in fostering "empowerment through valuing diverse, often marginalized voices." However, the anthology features only two poems (both of which are reprinted in these pages). I wanted to find out if there's been more, to find out for myself if it's true what they say, that the field of speculative poetry is just not diverse: live with it, accept it, move on. But I knew of poems and poets that defied this; certainly I

could find more, published here and there, in the field and out of it. Thus the idea for *The Moment of Change* was born.

When L. Timmel Duchamp agreed to publish the anthology, I announced an open submissions period, asked people for recommendations, talked to poets and editors, and read through the archives of multiple magazines and anthologies. My conclusion? Yes, there is diversity in speculative poetry. What we were lacking was a space in which to have a conversation, a space in which our diverse voices could resonate against each other and create an amplified and complex meaning.

The collection is before you: a roadmap to what diverse, intersectional feminist speculative poetry is and what it can become.

In these pages you will find works in a variety of genres—works that can be labeled mythic, fantastic, science fictional, historical, surreal, magic realist, and unclassifiable; poems by people of color and white folks; by poets based in the US, Canada, Britain, India, Spain, and the Philippines; by first- and second-generation immigrants; by the able-bodied and the disabled; by straight and queer poets who may identify as women, men, trans, and genderqueer. Some of the authors also write fiction, creative non-fiction, and academic scholarship; others focus solely on poetry. Some of the authors are established, others emerging. Some identify primarily as literary poets, others as speculative poets. Their ages range from early twenties to eighties. As Flavia Dzodan says, “My feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit.”

I think of this collection as a cornerstone—a compendium of dreams, oppressions, hopes, empowerment, yearning, and mature strength that comes from knowing that we are here. We speak with voices that have been silenced, ignored, marginalized, suppressed, ridiculed, forgotten. We re-remember ourselves, constantly remake ourselves, grapple with theory and life’s challenges. “See us,” the poets of this collection say. “Change with us. Walk with us. Dream with us.”

We are not monolithic. We argue, often bitterly, between ourselves. We disagree, and we create works of power and beauty that arise from these disagreements. We congregate in communities or work alone, but we are no longer invisible. By seeing each other, by empowering

each other, we reimagine the world, re-narrate society and history, celebrate our voices and complex identities through the filter of speculative creativity.

We are here.

Note

- 1 “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 1984

Werewomen

Ursula K. Le Guin

I want to go moonwalking
on it or under it I don't care
I just want to go moonwalking
alone.

Women in their sixties
don't go to the moon,
women in the cities
don't go out alone.
But I want O listen what I want
is to be not afraid.

Listen what I need is freedom.

Women in their sixties
think about dying,
all kinds of women
think about lying,
think about lying alone.

But listen there's a moon out there
and I don't want sex and I don't want death
and I don't want what you think I want,
only to be a free woman.

What is that, a free woman,
a young free woman,
an old free woman?

Asking for the moon.

Women in their sixties
have no moon.

Women in the cities
howl at the moon.

All kinds of women

talk about walking alone.
When the moon is full
listen how they howl,
listen how they howl together.

Harvest Season

Nicole Kornher-Stace

Between them all, the children
recognize perhaps five written letters
from their native tongue; not one
can spell her name — and yet
with voices older than their flesh they sing
the culling-songs, unwinding-songs,
fleet-fingered songs: one hoarse-voiced
where the ivy had once reached green fingers
round her throat and snugged up
to the bright fire of her breath (in a whirl of blades
they'd rescued her, but the scars stay); another with
a mangled knife-hand where a tendril,
in an eyeblink, grew clean through.
Their native tongue's obliterate. Their cradle tongue
is bones. Each with her apple-basket,
milk-pail, apron-front, they gather yellowed skulls,
some whole (why, the better to drink your health
from!), most deconstructed in the grasp
of vines and time to orbits,
frontals, maxillae — mosaic tesserae
destined for a rose window, a breastplate,
an intarsia-topped gueridon, a clutch of poison rings.
Their pockets stuffed with metatarsals,
eyeteeth, vertebrae (hedgewitch runestones,
swordhilt fripperies and prayer-beads), they braid
the useless fragments through their greasy hair
with fingers swollen from the wrenchings
where the slick green leaves
fight back. They sing, but not to keep
from weeping: where nice little girls hoard

dolls and seashells, they hoard tales, gaze up
through the green, and know
that every ruined tower has its princess —
and a harp pieced of her royal bones
might buy them passage
to the sea.

Prayer

Eliza Victoria

A tree sits in the wasteland of my mother's memory. The tree faces a river in her hometown, on the shore where nothing else grows. Like a curious child, it sits watching the boat that approaches it tonight, with the moon full and the stars slowly disappearing behind clouds like gossiping neighbors. On the boat is a sow, squealing like a prisoner. Someone lives in the tree. The tree-owner has many faces, hiding behind a window, in the crowd at the market, in the shadow of your bed. The sow is payment for a request, and the tree-owner always answers with an empty boat, floating down the river back to its sender.

How innocent the tree must look in the morning, like breakfast, like ourselves in that cold hour when we are lost in someone else's limbs, and we have yet to think of sacrifices. In a dark room, a mother-to-be sees blood between her thighs, and her husband runs out with a bolo, urging the shadows to face him like a man. This is not a death; this is an empty boat bobbing on tiny waves, a sow squealing itself to silence, an enemy masterminding his grief. The tree is useful that way, when you are blind with rage or fear, when you need to trace causality. How random is loss, and how we ache to have someone to blame, or to keep us safe. In any given time in this city, a sacrifice skids across the concrete sea, wraps itself around a tree that dares stand in the way. I send a sow across the river for the safety of everyone I love, and wait for the boat to return.

Cave-Smell

Shweta Narayan

*My mother was a brown bear
honey-lover, heavy paw
cave-smelling warm*

You say I am a girl
though my fur hangs heavy
and my claws click, stumbling careful
on your keyboard

*You smelled breath and fur
leavings and closed spaces
set me down, backed away
tranq gun raised*

I ask: <<What will I be?>>
A celebrity, you say. A triumph of neuroscience
and philanthropy.

Words too long to type. I say: <<No,
go to school.>>
You laugh and pet me.
Bright girl, brown girl,
bears don't do that.

*I smelled home
but she worried that implant plate with her rough tongue
licked shaved skin raw*

*and if she spoke
I did not know the words.*

And there's a laugh in your smile
when I eat honey or sashimi
And fear in your anger
when I snarl

though you do these things too.

*When you called
in my new tongue
I did not look back at her*

So I click, heavy-clawed
and write my halting
small-word
cave-smell stories
in the tongue you taught

And wonder if my daughters will read them
or if they will be brown bears.