

BOOK REVIEW

Milk and Filth

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Milk and Filth. By Carmen Giménez Smith. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, Camino del Sol Series, 2013. Pp. 80. \$13.25 (paper).

In Milk and Filth Carmen Giménez Smith brings us a new Latina aesthetic of poetry. In her title, Giménez Smith embraces two controversial archetypal symbols historically associated with the feminine. *Milk and Filth* indeed touches a delicate chord for women, particularly for working-class Latinas who, especially after World War II, have been employed in large numbers taking care of babies and housekeeping in the United States.

This collection is her latest literary work. Dr. Giménez Smith is author of a memoir, *Bring Down the Little Bird*, winner of a 2011 American Book Award, and three other poetry collections: *Odalisque in Pieces*, *The City She Was*, and *Goodbye, Flicker*, as well as several chap books. What makes this collection truly unique is her claim of iconically symbolic figures specific to the Chicana/Latina/Latin American feminine subconscious. Giménez Smith magically enters the poetic world through Greek adjectives, nouns or characters strewn throughout her collection: thanatos, hubris, Saphos, Phaedra... skillfully employing the language of the “cultured class” while problematizing the meanings of her rich poetics. She then privileges an openly feminist agenda in all three sections of the collection: Gender Fables, Small Deaths, and Becoming.

Her poems are like a collection of picture books opening to one particular page, at the same time—allowing us to see beyond the words— much

reminiscent of Ekaterina Panikanova's famous book paintings. Most memorable of the poetic scatology that one experiences in *Milk and Filth* is how Giménez Smith teaches us the preterit of the verb to shit in "Labor Day": "I split open like a melon./I bled and shat. My back was/semi-colon. I bled and shat." Like many of her readers, I am sure, I have never seen the term in a poem before. She applies all types of scatological images in her poetic license, which she also peppers, but does not salt in Spanish. There are truly only a handful of words in Spanish—including Chicana iconic figurative names "Guadalupe," "Llorona," and "Malinche."

In the tradition of other Chicana feminists, she subverts the powerlessness of Malinche—

Hernán Cortés' concubine, gifted to him by the indigenous people he "conquered"—into one "who wants to be lord," (6). Giménez Smith thus bridges Chicana sensibilities into mainstream poetry. In the case of Guadalupe, in the poem "The Mind Reader Advises Guadalupe" (15), Giménez Smith addresses Guadalupe as a "supernatural queen," and, some would say, makes the Virgin human: "You cling to strife because the colonizing/worm is buried deep in you and wouldn't you/know who came to define you? Fate is irony." The poet accuses the Virgin of colonizing and of wanting to become human: "you'd like to downgrade/into human. Then what? Amortality, osteoporosis/" (15).

Perhaps the most logrados, successful feminist poems are "Radicalization" and "Parts of an Autobiography" (33, 35). They synopsise both the author's feminist life and inscribe historically into a poem, the lives of women in their forties and what they have come up against, growing up in the US. Mentioning époque markers like *Sex and the City*, Plan B, *Our Bodies Our*

Selves, and renowned artist Louise Bourgeois' sculpture, the author canonizes the everyday for American women at the turn of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

In "Parts of an Autobiography," a feminist manifesto, Giménez Smith underlines how her mother prepared her to exit her social class, and poetically describes her experience growing up as the daughter of a brown woman in America: "She taught me to braid a rope of my hair out of the abyss of our class, / poems for ascension." This poetic narrative of womanhood in twentieth-century America, alone, makes *Milk and Filth* unique and an invaluable contribution to American letters, as well as to the study of sexuality in America:

9. I saw my cervix during a Pap smear.

10. The whole world had a new layer of grime for me to pick at:
misogyny

13. Feminism tried to accommodate me inside of its confines when I
was a polygon.

14. Sometimes feminism seemed a miracle, a cork bobbing up for air
in
the ocean. . . .

27. There are deserted bodies and ruined bodies and starved bodies
all
around me. . . .

30. I write angry that these women had little agency in this world
and that
they are not in books. . . .

Each point in "Parts of an Autobiography" is a bomb waiting to detonate in our mind's eye. The Trojan horse Giménez Smith builds is porous and

abrasive, sticky and liquid, a perfect net. We, against our wills, become her word fans and await her oeuvre to expand after the right poem(s) in each of her collections.

What Giménez Smith does so well is to weave the politically correct, feminist Latin@ poetic voice and experience into the American rug, so to speak. She, organically, not didactically, educates the reader about womanhood in America, giving us a synopsis of the 90s and a visionary truth to which we perhaps reluctantly return, as testimonial womanhood of our recent past and transgressive future.