

*Women in Praise of the Sacred* is a goddesssend. Between its covers, Jane Hirshfield, poet, translator and Zen student, have gathered 174 spiritual poetry by women from different cultures, spanning 43 centuries of human history. A modest sampling, considering that women have been writing poetry since the time of Enheduanna, Sumerian high priestess in 2300 BC whose hymns to the goddess Inanna are the earliest recorded literary writing; but an inspired and inspiring collection nevertheless. Clarissa Pinkola Estes, author of the influential book *Women Who Run with the Wolves* described the poems in *Women in Praise of the Sacred* as forming "the body, the breath, the heart, and the mind of the ageless being that lives through all time; the one that whispers both precious and pragmatic instructions to us as we row through the night." At least three of the poems reprinted here were selected because of the way they caught, first my gaze, and later, my awareness.

"Antiphon for Divine Wisdom" by Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) was the poem read as an invocation on the morning of the very first day of a particularly difficult workshop Isis had a few months ago. The poem was chosen by chance, by the random shuffling and opening of *Women in Praise of the Sacred*. "Antiphon for Divine Wisdom" was on the page where the book opened. Contemplating on how strongly St. Hildegard's poem echoed our collective hopes for clarity of mind and strength of spirit, it struck me and my Isis sisters that perhaps it was the poem that chose us.

The poems of Zi Ye (6th-3rd BC) and Kadya Molodowsky (1894-1975) came to me in the same way "Antiphon for Divine Wisdom" came to everybody in Isis: seemingly random and deeply unsettling. I originally passed up Zi Ye's poem for this spread, but for no apparent reason I kept returning to it even when press work had already started. I could only laugh at myself; at how stubbornly blind I was.

• *Pi Villanueva*

*The Poets: Many of the poets featured in Women in Praise of the Sacred, like Enheduanna before everyone of them, were women who led monastic or highly spiritual life. Sumangalamata, like her mother, was a member of the earliest community of women devoted to the Buddha. Hildegard of Bingen is the Christian Saint Hildegard who as a child of eight was sent by her family to live with the Benedictines, later becoming one of its most respected abbess. Uvavruk is an almost mythical figure, a high priestess and medicine woman among the Iglulik Eskimos in Greenland. Sub-ok was a Buddhist nun.*

# WOMEN in PRAISE of the SACRED

edited by Jane Hirschfield  
(USA: HarperCollins, 1994. 251 p.)

*Sumangalamata*  
(6th C.B.C.E.)

At last free,  
at last I am a woman free!  
No more tied to the kitchen,  
stained amid the stained pots,  
no more bound to the husband  
who thought me less  
than the shade he wove with his hands.  
No more anger, no more hunger,  
I sit now in the shade of my own tree.  
Meditating thus, I am happy, I am serene.

*Izumi Shikibu*  
(974?-1034?)

Watching the moon  
at midnight,  
solitary, mid-sky,  
O knew myself completely,  
no part left-out.  
(tr. by Jane Hirshfield and Mariko Aratani)

*Zi Ye*  
(6th-3rd C. B.C.E.)

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."  
(tr. by Arthur Waley)

*Rejected by the first temple she sought ordination from, Sub-ok became head of a temple she helped rebuild. Izumi Shikibu, considered the greatest woman poet of Japanese literature, was a courtier, a confidante to the empress, wife of a prince and mistress to another. Later abandoning courtly life, Shikibu devoted herself to deep contemplation and the study of Buddhist teachings. The identity of the poets responsible for the Nahuatl and the Kwakiutl women's prayers are now lost in our collective memory, but both invocations offer testimonies to woman's abiding respect for the spirit life manifest in nature. ♪*



*A Nahuatl Midwife's Invocation*

(early 1600s)

Please come forth,  
My jade calabash-cup  
And my mother Jade-skirted One;  
Soon you will bathe here,  
Soon you will cleanse here  
What was born in your hands,  
What came to life in your hands.

(tr. by Michael D. Coe and Gordon Whittaker)

*Uxamuk*

(19th c.)

The great sea  
frees me, moves me,  
as a strong river carries a weed.  
Earth and her strong winds  
moves me, takes me away,  
and my soul is swept up in joy.

*Kadya Molodowsky: Prayers I*

(1894-1975)

Don't let me fall  
As a stone falls upon the hard ground.  
And don't let my hands become dry  
As the twigs of a tree  
When the wind beats down the last leaves.  
And when the storm rises dust from the earth  
With anger and howling,  
Don't let me become the last fly  
Trembling terrified on a windowpane.  
Don't let me fall.  
I have asked for so much,  
But as a blade of your grass in a distant wild field  
Lets drop a seed in the lap of the earth  
And dies away,  
Sow in me your living breath,  
As you sow a seed in the earth.

(tr. by Kathryn Hellerstein)

*Kwakiutl Women's Prayer  
to the Sockeye Salmon*

(ca. 1895)

Welcome, o Supernatural One, o Swimmer,  
who returns every year in this world  
that we may live rightly, that we may be well.  
I offer you, Swimmer, my heart's deep gratitude.

I ask that you will come again,  
that next year we will meet in this life,  
that you will see that nothing evil should befall me.  
O Supernatural One, o Swimmer,  
now I will do to you what you came here for me to do.

*Hildegard of Bingen: Antiphon of Divine Wisdom*

(1098-1179)

Sophia!  
you of the whirling wings,  
circling encompassing  
energy of God:

you quicken the world in your clasp.

One wing soars in heaven  
one wing sweeps the earth  
and the third flies all around us.

Praise to Sophia!  
Let all the earth praise her!

(tr. by Barbara Newman)

*Sub-ok: Spring at Yesan Station*

(1902-1966)

The steam whistle cleaves to the wind  
As the train speeds over one thousand mountains.  
White clouds hang leisurely in the sky  
Over the station bidding farewell.  
The spring breeze spins a humming song  
In the branches of a green willow at the crossroads,  
Waving its cane as it returns, chanting alone.

(tr. by Julie Pickering)