Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Book Review: All That Wasted Fruit by Arminé Iknadossian

Alexandra Umlas · Wednesday, January 9th, 2019

Arminé Iknadossian's mother would gather olives from the trees that grew just outside of her daughter's high school; she couldn't imagine all of that wonderful fruit going to waste. Iknadossian has not written a poem for this image she remembers all of these years later, but perhaps all of the poems in her first collection of poetry are, in a way, an homage to her mother's incessant olive gathering.

In Arminé Iknadossian's *All That Wasted Fruit*, Iknadossian works to redefine what it means to be a woman by embracing ambiguity. Iknadossian takes the reader on a journey that is hinged and agile; a journey that relies on connection and interaction rather than on containers of definition.

The title of Iknadossian's collection, *All That Wasted Fruit*, comes from the poem "Father after Surgery." As the speaker visits her father in the hospital, the father glances outside at the hospital's mulberry tree and says, "All that wasted fruit." This is a sentiment, in America, that we can relate to – on trash day, emptying out the refrigerator, after a meal at a restaurant that we can't finish; however, the exclamation has larger implications in Iknadossian's poems. What does it mean to be wasted? What does it mean to be fruitful? Beirut-born, Southern California-raised Iknadossian gifts us poems that examine what it means to be a woman, in these times and in this place, without confining "woman" to any single definition. This is a feminist work, but because of Iknadossian's background, it is also an intersectional one.

Each of the six sections of the book, "Lover," "Warrior," "Queen Mother," "Goddess," "Priestess," and finally, "Wise Woman." is a form of "woman." Women are all of these things rather than one or the other, with "Wise Woman" as the finale, as if you have to be all of these women in order be wise. The sexual woman is also the priestess, the woman that needs help is also the warrior. "Woman" is broken out of its container.

One of the many forms woman takes in this collection is creator of both life and art. Each section explores the potential that has always resided in what is female. Iknadossian begins with the poem, "The Hallow Women," which takes T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" and reworks it into an entirely new female experience where the "Hollow" becomes "Hallow"; what is empty becomes holy. Women in the poem are honored for being "the stuff men leave behind" (ix). This leaving behind is not a place of detriment, but rather a sacred space, where women have power and knowledge. This poem alone is worth picking up the collection for, and the ending is particularly telling:

> *But life is not as long as you think,*

and this world will not end

In the sense you think it will,

Like a starved dog or a mewling infant.

It will end when we say. (xi)

Here, unlike Eliot's poem, the world does not end with "a whimper," but with women's collectively voiced decision. This last line asserts that women have the power of conception, and therefore, the power of what is the opposite of conception – the power to end both the word (this poem) and on a larger scale, the world. The power of the pen is likened to the power of the woman: power to transform and to create, to give birth to words/humans that might grow or change the world in some way and to decide when these words/worlds will end.

The journey Iknadossian takes us on is surprising, wondrous, and imaginative. In the second section, the poet invents what Joan of Arc would be like if she were still alive, and places her by the Mediterranean sharpening cutlery or eating olives. Iknadossian writes, "But most often, she would talk to the sea, / its curing fingers of foam, its fists of water / like a woman climbing out of ash and bone." Here, with poetry, Iknadossian rebirths Joan of Arc. Joan of Arc is also the "wasted fruit," the potential that did not get a chance to survive and thrive, like so many other women in history.

In the beautiful poem, "Pre-History," the poet acknowledges that she will not be a mother of any actual children, writing, "I will never come home / to babies– / carriages of little moons / with fine hair." However, later in the collection, Iknadossian writes a striking poem titled "Anahit in a New Millennium," where Anahit, the Armenian goddess of fertility, never has children, but instead, "kept rocks from her travels under her bathtub." The poem ends will the lines "She didn't care for cedar chests or wool cardigans. / Haikus crowded her mind like tiny spiders; /asterisks in the footnotes of her life." In this reimagining, Iknadossian creates a new feminist poetry, one that transforms our ideas of what is possible, one that asks us to look at life with new eyes, eyes that see women as creators not just of flesh and blood children, but of poems and other incredibly powerful things.

In the poem "Decalogue," the ten commandments are turned on their head so that the ten two-line stanzas Iknadossian includes in the poem are not commandments at all, but a collection of disparate things that find themselves paired together. The eighth stanza reads, "An invisible bullet enters my stomach. / I reach in and pull out the seed of a pomegranate." Here, steel is turned to seed, the origin of fruit. Seed by seed, Iknadossian grows a garden of visceral, gorgeous poems.

In the last section, the poet, who is "Wise Woman," muses on death, time, fear, and what is "true": "Everywhere I look there are truth seekers / in their grandfather's green jackets waiting / for their lives to begin." In this collection, Truth ceases to exist. In each section, in each poem, a multitude of tiny truths exist, shifting, changing, whispering, screaming.

There is also an overarching optimism. Yes, fruit has been wasted. Yes, even you will die. Yes, women have been marginalized – and yet we are here now, alive and writing. Here, margins become doors. Iknadossian is unlocking them all for us – here is the door of the American poet: unlocked, the door of the Armenian poet: unlocked, the door of gratitude: unlocked, the door of anger, unlocked. We walk through them all into the hopeful territory of poetry. Iknadossian's

words are lush, raw, and brave. It is easy to rely on definitions, but it is also limiting. In a world where definitions too often exclude or cut-off, Iknadossian's poems ask us to see things in a more inclusive, fully articulate way. Like Iknadossian's mother, we are invited to gather the fruit that others might not think to gather. In the last poem of the collection, Iknadossian reminds us why we are here:

> *Today the infinite dilemma*
> *is finding the color green in volcanic ash,*
>
> *in olivine, mineral that purifies.*
> *Grant me the truth left behind by fire.*
>
> *Grant me the strength of the oldest volcano.*
> *Grant me the words to risk everything.*

Take these poems and ingest them fully – the pits of them, the skin of them, their pulp. The poet has risked everything, and too much fruit has already been wasted.

Arminé Iknadossian's *All That Wasted Fruit* is available from Main Street Rag.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, January 9th, 2019 at 3:59 pm and is filed under Poetry, Reviews
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.