



Aleida Rodríguez
author of
Garden of Exile

**Selected by Marilyn Hacker as the 1998 Winner
of the Kathryn A. Morton Prize in Poetry**

You're fluent in two languages (English and Spanish) and write about exile in both. How would you describe the challenges and opportunities of bilingual writing?

“For many years, when my writing was solicited for anthologies or special issues of magazines, I always sent out a wide variety of work, but after the initial thrill of publication had worn off, I started to notice that, invariably, the pieces that addressed my exile, my mother, and my childhood in Cuba were the ones selected and reprinted again and again, making it seem as though that’s all I have to say—a three-note piano. Since this happens continually (yes, it *still* happens), it feels as though I’m being told there’s something *aberrant* (and unseemly) about my stepping out of the ghetto of ideas assigned to me, and a hushed embarrassment seems to accompany the return of my poems about psychological and spiritual states, the delights of visual art, or even my relationship with my backyard. My creative territory had been predetermined for me, silently, invisibly, and I began to experience such limitations as a glass cage. It also became apparent to me that this glass cage, though confining, would allow me a certain visibility—as long as I said and did the ‘right’ things within it.

“It is interesting to note that I have experienced this form of censorship at the hands of people who would otherwise be considered liberal, sometimes even radical—those who purport to oppose censorship in all its forms. Yet isn’t it much more radical, much more *inclusive* in the fullest sense of the multicultural agenda, to desegregate subject matter and understand that minority writers must occupy a wider territory—even occasional excursions into the nonpolitical? Why is it so hard to believe that some of us can actually *enjoy* being alive and want to render *that* delight instead of obsessing about how oppressed we are? The dictator I’m most interested in toppling is the internal one, the one who can do most harm. I hold with the Indian poet Kabir, an ecstatic Sufi, who says: ‘If you don’t break your ropes while you’re alive, do you think ghosts will do it after?’

(interview continues on reverse . . .)

Aleida Rodríguez, continued . . .

“. . . Maybe it's my being a Cuban writer that makes me so sensitive to fascism—regardless of its source. My own 'you can't go home again' is not abstract but tangible, a relationship with an absence that becomes nearly something, a phantom limb. I can't exist there, but here there are the mistaken assumptions about who I am, what my politics are, and what my subject matter 'should be' just because I'm able to check off the boxes labeled Cuban, Exile, Lesbian. From writers and editors of magazines and presses to taxi drivers, every American is looking to reeducate me about what's really going on in my native country. But, while that's annoying, what disturbs me is being penned in (pun intended), relegated to a ghetto of experience and ideas by people who would keep me exiled and wounded in my work because that position seems more authentic to them, never mind what it does to me as a human being, or as a writer. . . .

"Because of my 'identity,' I go through the world having to challenge expectations about me, shattering the glass cage in order to create more elbowroom for my work to exist—I almost wrote 'world' there, which is closer to my meaning. When I write, I am attempting to render the world that I experience through all of the lenses of who I am. Fortunately or unfortunately, due to my particular set of personal and historical influences, I straddle, or bridge, many boundaries. In me, a lot of borders meet, and I am grateful for the opportunities my exile has provided me to cross-pollinate. . . .

"My choice to adjoin in the widest possible sense has radicalized me. I want to know: *Why is a prison considered more political than a neighborhood?* I want to know: *In the largest sense, can I consider myself in exile if I am 'at home' in nature? Why is it considered aberrant that I am more drawn to finding metaphoric bridges in my backyard—that tiny piece of backyard we all share—than I am in burning them? Who says that whining or raging is more legitimate than delighting or loving?*

"To be fair, though, I have to admit that for many years my identity as an exile was of great importance to me. It was a deep trauma that I bore with as much pain and ambivalent pride as the enemy's blue numbers at my wrist. I had been violently ripped from all that I loved, and because no salve, no surgery, seemed to exist for such a wound, I staggered around grasping the arrow in my heart, mad with pain. My pain, I felt, was evidence of my fidelity to what I had lost. So if I now rail at others for circumscribing my world, it is because the release from my internal glass cage has been hard won. When I was willing to let go of my special status as a tragic exile, I awoke to the fact that we are all exiles—from various physical places, from families, from the past, from childhood. Suddenly, what had previously alienated me from others and made the world taste so bitter—no joy to be found anywhere!—was what allowed me to be linked to all beings. . . ."

Aleida Rodríguez's remarks are excerpted from her essay entitled "The Glass Cage," *Sleeping With One Eye Open: Women Writers on Surviving as Artists*, University of Georgia Press, 1999.