She Took Off Her Wings And Shoes

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SOR JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695)
The poem is based on her letter, The Answer, her poems, and the painting of her, “Retrato de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,” painted by Miguel Cabrera in 1750. Phrases in italics are quotes from poems and The Answer.

I hold my long necklace of rosary beads between two fingers.
When I first studied Latin,
I cut off fingerlengths of hair.
If I didn’t learn all my lessons
by the time it grew back,
I cut my fast-growing hair again.
Hair should not cover a head
so bare of facts—
the more desirable adornment.

One long sleeve drapes over the chair’s arm,
and my other hand turns
the pages of a book.
I begged my mother to dress me in men’s clothes.
In these clothes, I saw myself pacing the corridors of the University.

I slip away and follow my sister to her lessons.
I lie to the teacher
and tell her my mother wants me to have lessons, too.
The experience undeceived her.

Books and a clock are behind me.
My writing comes from a force beyond me.
Neither the reprimands of others
(for I have received many)
nor my own doubts stopped me.

My books are my teachers.
Many of them waited for me
on my grandfather’s shelves.
I learn from those lifeless letters
without a teacher’s voice.
I am always interrupted.

I gaze directly at the viewer.

 Truly, my Lady, at times
I ponder how it is
that a person who achieves high significance
is received as the common enemy.

No one forgives her for the fame she takes away.

Figures of the Winds and of Fame
decorate the highest points of the churches.
To defend them from the birds,
these images are covered with barbs.

Intelligence lacks defense.
I am warned to be more like
other nuns in the convent.

The curve of my rosary echoes
the curve of the table leg,
the folds in my dress.

Some have even sought
to prohibit me from study.
This could be a delusion
of the eye, displaying concavities
where there were none.

I sign in blood
that I will never write again.

I have forgotten the distance
between myself and your most
distinguished person,
which should not occur
were I to see you unveiled.

My hair is tucked away
and hidden by my veil,
my heart undone and passing
through your hands.

Red tablecloth, inkwells, quills
are still as I am in the painting.
Those quills used to beat the wind.
And she, rising from fire,
reanimates herself just when
she seems to be consumed.
The morning dew
embroidered her chaste veil with pearls.

I am she who is used
to walk among elegant similes.