

## JULIA ALVAREZ HOUSEKEEPING CAGES

Sometimes people ask me why I wrote a series of poems about housekeeping if I'm a feminist. Don't I want women to be liberated from the oppressive roles they were condemned to live? I don't see housekeeping that way. They were the crafts we women had, sewing, embroidering, cooking, spinning, sweeping, even the lowly dusting. And like Dylan Thomas said, we sang in our chains like the sea. Isn't it already thinking from the point of view of the oppressor to say to ourselves, what we did was nothing?

You use what you have, you learn to work the structure to create what you need. I don't feel that writing in traditional forms is giving up power, going over to the enemy. The word belongs to no one, the houses built of words belong to no one. We have to take them back from those who think they own them.

Sometimes I get in a mood. I tell myself I am taken over. I am writing under somebody else's thumb and tongue. See, English was not my first language. It was, in fact, a colonizing language to my Spanish Caribbean. But then Spanish was also a colonizer's language; after all, Spain colonized Quisqueya. There's no getting free. We are always writing in a form imposed on us. But then, I'm Scherezade in the Sultan's room. I use structures to survive and triumph! To say what's important to me as a woman and as a Latina.

I think of form as territory that has been colonized, but that you can free. See, I feel subversive in formal verse. A voice is going to inhabit that form that was

barred from entering it before! That's what I tried in the "33" poems, to use my woman's voice in a sonnet as I would use it sitting in the kitchen with a close friend, talking womanstuff. In school, I was always trying to inhabit those forms as the male writers had. To pitch my voice to "Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit...." If it didn't hit the key of "Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story," how could it be important poetry? The only kind.

While I was in graduate school some of the women in the program started a Women's Writing Collective in Syracuse. We were musing each other into unknown writing territory. One woman advised me to listen to my own voice, deep inside, and put that down on paper. But what I heard when I listened were voices that said things like "Don't put so much salt on the lettuce, you'll wilt the salad!" I'd never heard that in a poem. So how could it be poetry? Then, with the "33" sonnet sequence, I said, I'm going to go in there and I'm going to sound like myself. I took on the whole kaboodle. I was going into form, sonnets no less. Wow.

What I wanted from the sonnet was the tradition that it offered as well as the structure. The sonnet tradition was one in which women were caged in golden cages of beloved, in perfumed gas chambers of stereotype. I wanted to go in that heavily mined and male labyrinth with the string of my own voice. I wanted to explore it and explode it too. I call my sonnets free verse sonnets. They have ten syllables per line, and the lines are in a loose iambic pentameter. But they are heavily enjambed and the rhymes are often slant-rhymes, and the rhyme scheme is peculiar to each sonnet. One friend read them and said, "I didn't know they were sonnets. They sounded like you talking!"

By learning to work the sonnet structure and yet remaining true to my own voice, I made myself at home in that form. When I was done with it, it was a totally different form from the one I learned in school. I have used other traditional forms. In my poem about sweeping, since you sweep with the broom and you dance—it's a coupling—I used rhyming couplets. I wrote a poem of advice mothers give to their daughters in a villanelle, because it's such a nagging form. But mostly the sonnet is the form I've worked with. It's the classic form in which we women were trapped, love objects, and I was trapped inside that voice and paradigm, and I wanted to work my way out of it.

My idea of traditional forms is that as women much of our heritage is trapped in them. But the cage can turn into a house if you housekeep it the right way. You housekeep it by working the words just so.

#### HOW I LEARNED TO SWEEP

My mother never taught me sweeping...  
 One afternoon she found me watching  
 t.v. She eyed the dusty floor  
 boldly, and put a broom before  
 me, and said she'd like to be able  
 to eat her dinner off that table,  
 and nodded at my feet, then left.  
 I knew right off what she expected  
 and went at it. I stepped and swept;  
 the t.v. blared the news; I kept  
 my mind on what I had to do,  
 until in minutes, I was through.  
 Her floor was as immaculate  
 as a just-washed dinner plate.

I waited for her to return  
 and turned to watch the President,  
 live from the White House, talk of war:  
 in the Far East our soldiers were  
 landing in their helicopters  
 into jungles their propellers  
 swept like weeds seen underwater  
 while perplexing shots were fired  
 from those beautiful green gardens  
 into which these dragonflies  
 filled with little men descended.  
 I got up and swept again  
 as they fell out of the sky.  
 I swept all the harder when  
 I watched a dozen of them die...  
 as if their dust fell through the screen  
 upon the floor I had just cleaned.  
 She came back and turned the dial;  
 the screen went dark. *That's beautiful,*  
 she said, and ran her clean hand through  
 my hair, and on, over the window-  
 sill, coffee table, rocker, desk,  
 and held it up—I held my breath—  
*that's beautiful,* she said, impressed,  
 she hadn't found a speck of death.

#### NAMING THE FABRICS

Mother, unroll the bolts and name  
 the fabrics from which our clothing came,  
 dress the world in vocabulary:  
 broadcloth, corduroy, gingham, terry.  
 Gingham and calico, crepe and gauze,  
 gabardine, organdy, wool, madras,  
 fabrics, Mother, name them all,  
 jersey, chambray, satin, voile.

I won't drink out of a strange cup or use borrowed clothing. Everything is infused with hazard and imagination's power, stronger than actual. I won't accept dinner invitations in case magic powders have been disguised in the garlic seasonings. But my house, though protected with charms, can't block the spell mortality has cast, thirty-two, I turn thirty-three.

**SONNET 42**  
(from "33")

Sometimes the words are so close I am more who I am when I'm down on paper than anywhere else as if my life were practising for the real me I become unbuttoned from the anecdotal and unnecessary and undressed down to the figure of the poem, line by line, the real text a child could understand. Why do I get confused living it through? Those of you, lost and yearning to be free, who hear these words, take heart from me. I once was in as many drafts as you. But briefly, essentially, here I am... Who touches this poem touches a woman.

**BILINGUAL SESTINA**

Some things I have to say aren't getting said in this snowy, blonde, blue-eyed, gum chewing English,  
dawn's early light sifting through the *persianas* closed the night before by dark-skinned girls whose words

evoke *cama*, *aposenio*, *sueños* in *nombres* from that first word I can't translate from Spanish.

Gladys, Rosario, Altagracia—the sounds of Spanish wash over me like warm island waters as I say your soothing names: a child again learning the *nombres*

of things you point to in the world before English turned *sol*, *tierra*, *cielo*, *luna* to vocabulary words—*sun*, *earth*, *sky*, *moon*—language closed

like the touch-sensitive *morivivir* whose leaves closed when we kids poked them, astonished. Even Spanish failed us then when we realized how frail a word is when faced with the thing it names. How saying its name won't always summon up in Spanish or English  
the full blown genii from the bottled *nombre*.

Gladys, I summon you back with your given *nombre* to open up again the house of slatted windows closed since childhood, where *palabras* left behind for English stand dusty and awkward in neglected Spanish. Rosario, muse of *el patio*, sing in me and through me say  
that world again, begin first with those first words

you put in my mouth as you pointed to the world—not Adam, not God, but a country girl numbering the stars, the blades of grass, warming the sun by saying

*el sol* as the dawn's light fell through the closed *persianas* from the gardens where you sang in Spanish, *Esta son las mañanitas*, and listening, in bed, no English

yet in my head to confuse me with translations, no English