

My Book of the Dead: New Poems

Ana Castillo

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No aspect of life is left unexamined in the piercing poems of Ana Castillo's new collection *My Book of the Dead*.

Embracing her place as “the original Xicanista,” Castillo’s collection straddles the line between personal and political. Poems about motherhood, womanhood, and recovery from cancer are intercut with pieces about immigration and climate change. Even the impact of the policies and social upheaval of the previous presidential administration do not escape Castillo’s insight. “How to Tell You Are Living under Rising Fascism (A Basic Primer in Progress)” deals with this directly, laying out the quieter harbingers of an authoritarian regime:

*History books are revised.
Current events twisted.
The future does not exist.
(Instead, it is reported before it happens.)*

Culture is infused throughout the collection, illustrated with language, spirituality, and Castillo’s own drawings. Aztec deities appear in several poems. Seven poems are rendered in both Spanish and English, translated by Castillo and others. Most have a melancholy tone about them, but “Algo de ti (An Ekphrastic Exercise)”/“Something About You (An Ekphrastic Exercise)” has a tone of admiration and respect.

With a sharp eye and even sharper wordplay, the poems radiate with emotion, from anger to heartbreak. Beginning with “A Storm Upon Us,” a memorial poem for friend, and continuing through “Drops Fell on the Roof,” honoring the lost students and staff of the Parkland shooting, the spectre of death hovers over the collection. It’s an unwelcome presence in most poems: the pieces make it clear that many of the deaths are avoidable. However, the poems of the final section also assert that death is the way of life, and a necessary part of the cycle—not to be feared, but embraced.

My Book of the Dead is a striking poetry collection that honors the lost, known and unknown.

DONTANÁ MCPHERSON-JOSEPH (September / October 2021)

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