

“THE ENDLESS SKY ABOVE”: ON KSENIA RYCHTYCKA’S *A SKY FULL OF WINGS*

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REVIEWED BY NICOLE YURCABA

In the ever-developing pantheon of emerging Ukrainian literature, each contributing voice adds to the intricate embroidery the genre is slowly, surely forming. For years, male authors dominated what little Ukrainian literature was translated and marketed to English-speaking audiences. Thus, the contributions of female authors’ voices to the genre are increasingly important, especially as Ukrainian culture progresses from one of patriarchy to one of inclusivity. Of course, the other challenge that Ukrainian literature faces is the many stereotypes that Russian propaganda has forced onto the Ukrainian people: historically, Russians referred to Ukrainians as “the little Russians”; strict regulation at multiple times throughout history banned Ukrainian language from being used; even today, in countries like the Czech Republic, Ukrainians face harsh discrimination as they emigrate and seek jobs. Even more significantly, as the war in the Donbass Region and the illegal annexation of Crimea continues to threaten Ukraine’s sovereignty and economic progress, it becomes imperative that collections like Ksenia Rychtycka’s *A Sky Full of Wings* gain notice.

A Sky Full of Wings is a labyrinthine collection, one that embraces not only the literal journeys one takes, but also the metaphorical and figurative journeys—as well as the liminal spaces in which these various voyages intertwine. The poems’ speaker reflects, questions, and explores ancestral ties, ancestral land, family, and the spaces and places that leave the deepest impressions on one’s being. While heavily focused on Ukrainian history, traditions, and culture, the collection embraces travel and the borderless explorations a backpack well-fitted can offer. One such poem is the collection’s opener, “Ode to Journeying.” Longing perpetuates the poem, and the repetition of “I’d” reinforces this longing. Noticeably, the poem begins in “the land

of the Midnight Sun” and ends with the speaker declaring “I’d sail up the Dnipro river,” much like the portions of Ukrainian history rooted in that of the Vikings.

Nonetheless, at the heart of *A Sky Full of Wings* is loss. As Rychtycka’s intimate poems detail her grandparents’ and parents’ escapes from war-torn Ukraine, readers find themselves encountering a history that history textbooks of the Western variety often ignore. The loss is exacerbated by displacement. In the poem “Brushing Grandmother’s Hair,” readers find a cross-generational story in which a granddaughter contemplates the relationship she has with her grandmother. The speaker informs readers that the grandmother “never told me stories about her childhood.” She also shares that the grandmother never shared “how she’d fled her homeland. How she’d crouched beside her children’s graves, / swept dirt from their headstones, sat on cold ground for hours.” Loss at the personal and cultural levels, as well as relation level, permeates the poem. What readers see happen, nonetheless, is how the simple act of brushing the grandmother’s hair becomes an intimate act that allows the granddaughter to momentarily understand her grandmother.

Hope and fulfilment, however, conquer the loss and the perpetual sadness of losing one’s homeland. What readers find throughout the book are poems of return, where a single trip reunites one with a language and a culture with which one is familiar and a part of but has remained separated from due to geography. “Why Honey Matters” is a careful balance of the past, the present, departure, and return. The poem utilizes honey as a center, one that binds not only the family and its traditions, but also its history. Divided into three sections, the poem opens in 1944, with the declaration “Back in Ukraine, Dido loved beekeeping.” The section continues by detailing life in an internment camp, where the honey the grandfather acquires from the bees translates into money that buys “bread for Mother, Uncle and Babtsia.” This section segues into the second, set in 2018. The speaker states, “Mother comes to me as I’m making honey cake, / measuring sugar then whipping eggs. / Never mind that Mother left this earth / eighteen months earlier.” The ancestral ties and family binds Ukrainians recognize and hold dear work

to empower the speaker: “Now that Mother’s with me, I grow bold.” The section’s final line—“Like Mother, I don’t hold back”—communicates the speaker’s affirmation and confidence. The poem’s third and final section depicts what many displaced Ukrainians and the generations that follow long for—reunion with family and their ancestral home: “This morning, in a Carpathian / hometown—a blue door opened.” Readers are swept into the vivid action of “Only the caress of reunion inside.”

By the collection’s end, readers have taken their own journeys, and they leave questions of their own about their own histories and ancestral stories. The poems uniquely depict the Ukrainian American experience, which encompasses voices that are often overlooked in American society since, unlike Canada, the US does not recognize its Ukrainian and Ukrainian American populations. *A Sky Full of Wings* is a powerful collection, one that possesses the grace and history of Lina Kostenko’s work and is sure to engage readers of all backgrounds and cultures.