

Phyllis

Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz

*Phyllis, a brush's boldness
emboldens my feather-pen:
that brush's glorious failure
engenders hope, not fear.*

*Risking error in your cause
sufficed to spur me on.
When risk becomes so precious,
what value has mere success?*

*So do allow this quill
to risk another flight,
since, having offended once,
it otherwise has no leave.*

.....

*You, O exquisite Phyllis,
such a heavenly creature,
grace's gift to the world,
heaven's very perfection.*

*On your most hallowed altars
no Sheban gums are burnt,
no human blood is spilt,
no throat of beast is slit,*

*for even warring desires
within the human breast
are a sacrifice unclean,
a tie to things material,*

*and only when the soul
is afire with holiness
does sacrifice glow pure,
is adoration mute.*

.....

*I, my dearest Phyllis,
who revere you as divine,
who idolize your disdain,
and venerate your rigor;*

*I, like the hapless lover
who, blindly circling and circling,
on reaching the glowing core,
falls victim to the flame;*

*I, like the innocent child,
who, lured by the flashing steel,
rashly runs a finger
along the knife-blade's edge;*

*who, despite the cut he suffers,
is ignorant of the source
and protests giving it up
more than he minds the pain;*

*I, like adoring Clytie,
gaze fixed on golden Apollo,
who would teach him how to shine--
teach the father of brightness!*

*I, like air filling a vacuum,
like fire feeding on matter,
like rocks plummeting earthward,
like the will set on a goal-*

*in short, as all things in Nature,
moved by a will to endure,
are drawn together by love
in closely knit embrace ...*

*But, Phyllis, why go on?
For yourself alone I love you.
Considering your merits,
what more is there to say?*

*That you're a woman far away
is no hindrance to my love:
for the soul, as you well know,
distance and sex don't count.*

.....

*How could I fail to love you,
once I found you divine?
Can a cause fail to bring results,
capacity go unfulfilled?*

*Since you are the acme of beauty,
the height of all that's sublime--
that Time's green axle-tree
beholds in its endless turning--*

*can you wonder my love sought you out?
Why need I stress that I'm true,
when every one of your features
betokens my enslavement?*

*Turn your eyes toward yourself
and you'll find in yourself and in them
not only occasion for love
but compulsion to surrender.*

*Meanwhile my tender care
bears witness I only live
to gaze at you spellbound and sigh,
to prove that for you I die.*