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## Senior, Olive. *Over the Roofs of the World.*

Maria McGarrity  
anthuriumcaribjournal@gmail.com

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**Olive Senior**

***Over the Roofs of the World***

**Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2005, 109 pp.**

***By Maria McGarrity***

Olive Senior's new collection of poetry, *Over the Roofs of the World*, shows once more why she is one of the most resourceful and imaginative of poets. Her images draw in the reader like the birds in flight that she so compellingly describes as both the poet and reader arrive at new and surprising destinations. Senior's flight images thread the various and vibrant materials of the collection.

This collection is a broad image-driven conversation with the notion of travel and migration. Initially, the travelers and migrants are birds; they are outside and above, moving between the precarious global rooftops that she identifies in her title. Her evocation of the native "hummingbird" and the strong "Guinea Hen" forces a dialogue with "Crusoe's Parrot." This dialogue becomes a powerful narrative poem on the transformation of life, the role of poetic voice, and the waiting to "gift me speech" (20). The arrival and transformation of this speech is quietly followed in the "ultimate secret" is the revelation of "Eve: Eva: Ave" (21). This trinity of sacred appellation belies the heart of the fall. Senior's use of the fall shows her need to seek knowledge and distrust of its ultimate disguise—not in the form of a mythic snake but in a parrotry of mimicry.

While the recurring flight symbols in the collection are striking, Senior's use of stress and her play on vowel sounds are equally intriguing. Her poem, "Albatross," consistently depends on the heaviness of the stress of "o." She writes, "Once airborne, the Albatross/ turns stateless ocean rover, its impetus born/ of knowing that is going forward it will always/ be homing back" (36). The repetition and stress of the "o" builds until its final deployment in the last line: homing. The "o" is the quest for return, reified through the arrows in an ocean journey. It moves forward and then back like the natural rhythms of the sea waves, above which it hovers. Reminiscent of Derek Walcott's invocation of "O" in *Omeros*, Senior's "o" is a call to return and to begin the journey anew at once.

The second broad movement of poems moves away from the expression of flight and return to a more specific geography. This section of poems is called "island." While the transcendence/ immanence of sky and earth dichotomy of flight is overt earlier, in this group this dichotomy is more richly linked with "island" life. Senior emphasizes the landed-ness of the figure and metaphoric shape of the island. The "o" repeats again, not to return home or to begin the journey anew, but to demonstrate its physicality on the page. The opening poem, "Allspice,"

is formed to resemble an “o” or perhaps an island on the page. The weight of the first 3 and last 5 lines is light and airy with the strong compression of the middle 8 lines. This compression contrasted with openness suggests the process of weighing the spaces of the line. This negotiation of weight becomes a subtle critique not simply of weighing commodities, the “allspice,” but of crushing them.

In the most arresting poem of the collection, Senior rebukes the mythic Crusoe and the actual Conrad. She writes, “the moment you land/ I become islanded/ In the shadows of the rain forest/ I wait in submission/ Amidst the trembling of the leaves/ I practice hesitant discourse/ Always/ my impenetrable heart” (44). This salient image of submission leads to insurrection and the core of resistance and impenetrability. In the shocking yet magical transition of becoming “islanded,” Senior posits the process of submission becoming one of insurrection in a gesture of homecoming. This alterity of perspective from the distant to the nearness of island identity suggests the degree of colonial and postcolonial subjectivity remains a process of perspective and power over land. The Caribbean relation between and among the “islanded” finally becomes revealed as singularly more significant than either Crusoe or Conrad could possibly imagine. While the seriousness of the subtext of colonial encounter permeates the pages of the collection, it is often eased through moments of wit, irony, and laughter. The overall tone is serious, but the reader imagines Senior having a good laugh in her “Message in a Bottle,” which undercuts the ironic with twists of the unexpected as the poetic voice becomes not the traveler but the ocean itself.

The last section of poems in the collection is literally threaded together with indigo. The color blue permeates these lines and fills the in-between spaces of the collection much like the sea fills the in-between of the Caribbean’s “meta-archipelago.” Her quest for blue meaning is at once an icon of isolation and belonging to something beyond the individual. “Blue was like standing on that isthmus between/ oceans, finding washed up on the beach” (58). She connects the liminal shore with the isolation of the individual in the greater collective of the isthmus/island. She finds a collective experience of isolation that ironically connects beyond and between oceans, continent, and hemispheres.

Senior’s final poem in the collection is “Ode to Pablo Neruda.” Originally commissioned for the BBC Radio programming, Senior includes a revision of the poem to end her collection. Neruda’s lines intersect her own throughout. The intersection of the work of the two writers almost appears as a complex web or threading in suspension a dialogue of understanding and inspiration. She embraces Neruda because he had the courage to see in modernity not the alienation and suffering of the contemporary void, the emptiness of the rejection of heaven like Kafka and Nietzsche, but the acceptance and exploration of the openness of the heavens, the skies as new realms of possibility. Senior redefines the heavens not simply a place *Over the Roofs of the World* but as her unfastening of the shackles that create such a hierarchy of above and below. We are fortunate that Senior takes her readers so reliably on her imaginative flights to these new realms.