

# Softando Amarras/ Casting Off

Poems by Claribel Alegria, English translation by Margaret Sayers Peden  
ISBN 1-880684-98-5  
(Curbstone Press, \$13.95 paperback)

Review by Tony Beckwith ©2003 [www.tonybeckwith.com](http://www.tonybeckwith.com)

In A COMPLEX WORLD the eloquence of simplicity moves us. It flings open faded shutters and floods us with the joy of feeling. The poet's words have the power to move us, often to tears, as in Claribel Alegria's "The Ache of Absence": "how my fingertips ache / when I hold out my hand / and don't find you."

Claribel Alegria, born in 1924, is a Nicaraguan-Salvadoran poet who lives in Managua. She came to the States to go to school when she was nineteen, and married an American husband, but her roots and life are deeply intertwined with the history and politics of Central America. She lent her voice to the "Committed Generation," a movement of middle and upper class intellectuals of the mid-fifties and early sixties that clamored for social and political justice for the under-privileged. Her poems also speak to women, urging them to break free from the oppression of patriarchy in all its guises.

She writes of feelings, and of mythological characters, of casting off, of new horizons, and of her cat: "How I envy my cat / who never suffers from insomnia." Most of her poems have a bare, minimalist structure, like empty rooms with whitewashed walls and windows opening onto visions that shimmer somewhere between "caressing colors / with all five senses / and this world of prophetic dreams."

When her husband died in 1995, Alegria used poetry as a means of

coming to terms with his death. The result was an earlier book, *Sorrow*, in which she transmuted her grief into lyrical sketches of a wounded soul. In this latest collection there is an air of sadness, certainly, but the deeper mood is beyond sadness, sounding like a voice profoundly at peace with itself, suspended in contemplation of the past and eager to embrace the next stage. "I long for that other flight / the one I will undertake alone."

She has published over forty books including poetry, novels, and a volume of children's stories. Well known in the Spanish-speaking world, Alegria has been building a following in the United States ever since she was

interviewed by Bill Moyers for his Language of Life series that aired on PBS in the mid-nineties. Many of her books have been translated, and the English version of her latest collection, *Casting Off*, is the admirable work of Margaret Sayers Peden, a veteran translator of great Latin American authors. Alegria's poems are deceptively simple, pruned down to the essential and nothing more, yet each tear drop reveals an ocean, and there is music on every line. The last one in this book is called "Curtain": "My footsteps are leading / toward quiet solitude / toward the star-silence / that has no more questions."★

