Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Cynthia Alessandra Briano: Two Poems

Cynthia Alessandra Briano · Tuesday, July 13th, 2021

Tlacuila, Day 38 Plague

Someone turns the page of a map,
someone says, I can see the whole map—

It’s not like starting a wildfire, the trees grow back.
These words are a special burn—eradicate. Decimate.
They are a mathematical number: reduced.
Depopulate.
They are the prefix de- to nullify and undo.
They are a condition: devastated.
These words are ascribed to us. They are the streaks of smoke
on the walls. Who
scribe
ascribed them to us? Not the tlacuilos.

Tlacuila: scribe (female)

I am a tlacuila.

Translation involves movement
words are unfolded as pronounced
words as flowers
words possess a beautiful scent

What is the state of war? The day of ceasefire? —No one to fight Day 30. No one to lead.
The decimation is enough. Then they have to fight. Those who were left. Those who could stand.

Imagine if now, we had to fight?

Why do we overleap buildings?
The women help you escape.
Each day you cross a footbridge.

The braids weaved by hand.
Who will know to mend it
with care when I am gone?
Who will cross it by foot?
Which stone structure will forget
my weaving hands?

We waited on the roof—we were trying to escape. We were trying to help someone.
We wanted love. Someone touched, or touched me when we shouldn't. We were on our knees.

If I open my eyes I forget. Try to return, sometimes I can. Sometimes it's a new dream. Sometimes I can feel when I've been searching. I can feel when I've been touched.

Codex Codices Index Indices

smallpox: and depopulation,
brought by Narváez,
Cuitlahua dies of,
the Valley of Mexico, in
Tenochtitlán,
pathology,
Spanish allies killed by,
see also disease
disease: and leadership; and

New World population,
see also smallpox
List of maps

Nahuatl pronunciation guide
short chronology of the conquest
brief sketches of the participants

Florentine Codex,
Sahagún, Bernardino de,
Codex Mendoza,
diseases,
natives susceptibility to,

I am the scribe that is held hostage. It is only one generation into colonization. I can still speak Nahuatl. I have learned Spanish, too, and Latin. I can ask my elders. They are outside, exposed to the disease. I am in quarantine. It is the 16th century.

I have had what passes for an elite education. You have taught me your language so I can translate it into mine and convert them to yours. You are suspicious that we only pretend to believe. That we're still us in another form.

Only the words can do the work.

viruela ciruela bisabuela tachuela
sarampión campeón población

pockmark
I count the days of exposure and infection. I compare timelines the way I've seen: Mexico 1519, Day 1 Exposure. But I'm not an epidemiologist. I'm probably counting wrong, telling it wrong, or comparing the wrong things. Still, I draw lines up against what my mind keeps pairing. If I accept this pairing, I must ask: where will this pairing take me?

vislumbrar: to catch a glimpse of; to be faintly visible, to know imperfectly
vislumbre: glimmer; indication; to perceive a thing without seeing it clearly
plaga: plague; calamity

My parents and all my uncles and aunts have a round scar on their upper arm, right below their left shoulder, where the skin is depressed. "Donde me vacunaron," they say. I only looked up today which vaccine it was. If you have this scar on your arm, and you got it in Mexico before 1970, it was for smallpox.

This is the only way I can do it: arrange the items that walk together in my understanding. It's not an addition problem, or one of logic. In debate, logic is what *must* be true.

This is the only inheritance, the only markings on our body. The scars are the proof, and we try to work the experiment in reverse. That is how my understanding is. The only understanding is what I can touch, the scar on my father's shoulder, the count of the things I can count.

Two emperor successions in eight months because they died from the disease. No one with experience to lead the defense of your empire.

And don't think I know about Mexican history. We're not raised in the U.S. to know it. The few paragraphs in the textbooks saying: depopulation—instead of pueblo, estimate—instead of story. I quarantine, I read, I ask my elders. That is my work: I transcribe into written form memory they have carried.

I can't encompass all of it. The world takes me inward. It can only happen through my hands.

Grief is laborious. I have done its labor. Now I come to you with the work of my words.

At first, the images seem to have no order nor concert
and we count the years by thirteens
we dismount from our understanding,
    let's discompose them in their element hearts

        the pen, the precious instrument to make fire
        the wild silver
        the place name

the documents are oriented, not northed
the sun is the most important direction

he's the one that speaks blue

the one of the turquoise word, he, the precious-speaking

She’s the one that speaks blue, the one of the turquoise word

She, the precious-speaking

the action of emitting the voice
it is written in this verb: She-is-speaking

Ella es la del hablar precioso

Though no tlacuilo was female—I insert my sex.

She who speaks arenoso—sand, grit, grain in her words,
—an extranger, she who does not speak the language well.

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The Mouth-Carriers

We carried the gold between our teeth,
the silver beneath our tongues,
the treasure in the pockets of our lungs.

We passed it on to each other from breath to breath
like oxygen—the fireflower kiss,

the cloudburst cuento. We’ve breathed it
onto the leaves of our gardens, and it is now
in the seeds.

For centuries, our wordless labor extracted.
For centuries, our voiceless toil.

Now we open our mouth-carriers
like chests of gold.

We are again the royal scribes. We are again
the speakers of beautiful words, their unfolding
fragrant like a scroll in flower.

We unwind the words
from beneath the binding
over our ribcages.

We melt the silver into the light over the sky.
We melt the gold into the saying.

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