

Zacuanpapalotls

By Brenda Cárdenas

(in memory of José Antonio Burciaga, 1947-1996)

We are chameleons. We become chameleon.
—José Antonio Burciaga

We are space between—
the black-orange blur
of a million Monarchs
on their two-generation migration
south to fir-crowned Michoacán
where tree trunks will sprout feathers,
a forest of paper-thin wings.

Our Mexica cocooned
in the membranes de la Madre Tierra
say we are reborn zacuanpapalotls,
mariposas negras y anaranjadas
in whose sweep the dead whisper.

We are between—
the flicker of a chameleon's tail
that turns his desert-blue backbone
to jade or pink sand,
the snake-skinned fraternal twins
of solstice and equinox.

The ashen dawn, silvering dusk,
la oración as it leaves the lips,
the tug from sleep,
the glide into dreams
that husk out mestizo memory.

We are—
one life passing through the prism
of all others, gathering color and song,
cempazuchil and drum
to leave a rhythm scattered on the wind,
dust tinting the tips of fingers
as we slip into our new light.

Notes:

The epigraph of this poem was originally omitted in the changeover to the new website. Because of this, reciting the epigraph is optional for the 2019-2020 Poetry Out Loud season.

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A native of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Brenda Cárdenas writes in a blend of English and Spanish, which she has said reflects her interest in "the interconnectedness and juxtapositions of difference and similarity between seemingly disparate peoples, events, places, and experiences." She is a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.