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Trace

POETRY BY

Brenda Cárdenas

With arresting images and scintillating internal music, the poems in *Trace* are at turns ekphrastic, elegiac, mythic, rebellious, interlingual, and whimsical, forming a constellation of experience and its traces which transgress borders at every turn.

Through image-rich poems regarding migration, transcultural identity, loss, connection, dream, and aging—some translingual, some ekphrastic responses to ephemeral and surreal works of art—Brenda Cárdenas' *Trace* explores conditions of displacement, liminality, and mutability. These poems transgress illusory borders between lands, languages, humans and the rest of the natural world, waking and dreaming, and the living and the dead as they unearth traces of experience that shape and haunt us, traces we leave behind for others to encounter. Although elegy resurfaces throughout this collection as does a poetics of social consciousness, Cárdenas also embraces moments of levity, story, and an effervescent internal music that balance her steps through fraught yet bewitching terrain.

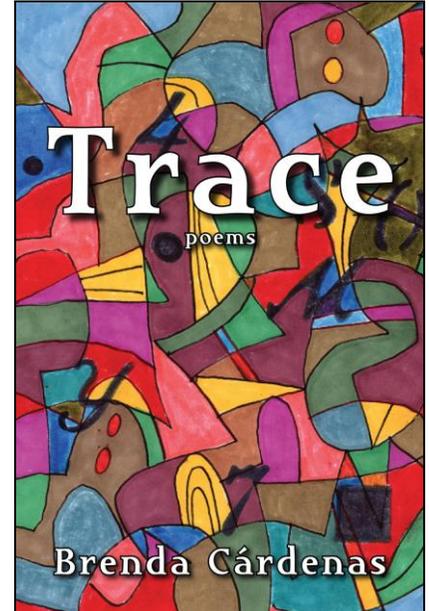
ADVANCE PRAISE

“In these darkest of days, we are lucky to have the words of a writer as sustaining as Brenda Cárdenas, one who reminds us that poetry has always done the impossible, whether urging us ‘to decipher the morphology of dream’ or summon the wisdom of our ancestors (‘What can we do with this gathering of ghosts / but welcome them home’). To call these poems ekphrastic would not do them justice: they are sculptural, kinetic, sinuous, and syncopated, by turns mythic and quotidian, implacable *placa* and ‘phosphorescent scrolls,’ and they claim their own brilliantly expanded field (Lucille Clifton, Ana Mendieta, Cecilia Vicuña, Remedios Varo, etc.) with the care and urgency of what Cárdenas calls ‘raucous cariño.’ From her Milwaukee of the heart, this former poet laureate knows that our cities are portals, even as ‘Every migration / bears its fallen’ and we seek out ‘a psalm for healing / without being held’ amid the body’s devastation. *Trace* is a triumph of poetry as a liminal practice that works against invisibility and facile legibility, at the threshold of the self, where a new consciousness is possible.”

—Urayoán Noel, Author of *Transversal*, *Buzzing Hemisphere*/*Rumor Hemisférico*, *Enunciador*, and *Hi-Density Politics*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brenda Cárdenas is the author of *Boomerang* (Bilingual Press) and the chapbooks *Bread of the Earth/The Last Colors* with her husband Roberto Harrison; *Achiote Seeds/Semillas de Achiote* with Cristina García, Emmy Pérez, and Gabriela Erandi Rico; and *From the Tongues of Brick and Stone*. She also coedited *Resist Much/Obey Little: Inaugural Poems to the Resistance* (Spuyten Duyvil Press) and *Between the Heart and the Land: Latina Poets in the Midwest* (MARCH/Abrazo Press). Cárdenas has served as faculty for the CantoMundo writers’ retreat and as Milwaukee Poet Laureate. She currently teaches Creative Writing and Latinx Literature at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.



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MORE PRAISE FOR TRACE

“To read the poems in *Trace* is to journey through tierra, myth, wound, and love. With her richly textured imagery and a language layered with music and truth, Brenda Cárdenas paints the ceremonies of the living and the realms of the dead. There is a visceral sense of place and much elegy in this collection; there is also a soulful imagination that seeks healing, as seen when the Mayan moon goddess Ix Chel appears to anoint the bodies of the drowned, or how a funnel of bees hum with ‘the work of finding home.’ For Cárdenas, that quest is everywhere.”

—**Emma Trelles**, author of *Tropicalia* and poet laureate of Santa Barbara

“Brenda Cárdenas flexes, topples, and surrenders to the ‘gathering of ghosts’ who have returned in these resolute and electrifying poems as ‘bright as a quintet of monarchs in milkweed flickering.’ A constellation of ‘brujas, chavalas, carnales, cabrones, rucas, locas, comadres . . . una vieja y sus recuerdos,’ Cárdenas refuses to root herself into solitary complacency and reveals a voice as ‘bright as chrome.’ This collection is a journey of faith and memory tracing a path toward a life lived like a ‘trapeze artist, contortionist, upsidedown, insideout, wracked with sweet pain.’ These poems are a gift of lyrical intensity that move us optimistically toward something yet to be imagined.”

—**Ruben Quesada**, editor of *Latinx Poetics: Essays on the Art of Poetry* and author of *Revelations* and *Next Extinct Mammal*

FROM TRACE

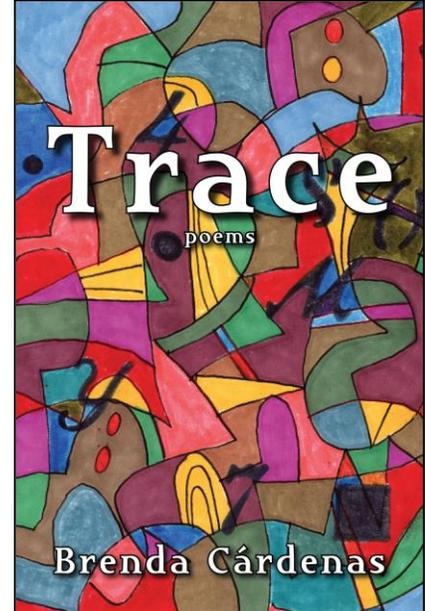
They say we dig our own graves.

I have laid me down
in a Yagul tomb, outlined
my island arms with twig, rock,
blossom, mud. My pulse with fire,
glass and blood. I’ve raised
myself in the earth’s beds, left
this trace, this exiled breath.

—from the poem “Nexus”

Cien nombres para la muerte: La zapatona/The Fleet-Footed Woman
(after a print by Erik Ricardo de Luna Genel and for Daniel)

Brother, your heart was a speed metal
drummer in a breakaway, jamming
for the finish. They had to trip it, stop
it, start it, shock it ’til it threw you
to your knees. And La Zapatona, sure-footed
in her winged sneakers, tucked phalanges
into fists and bolted, ponytail sailing
in her wake, piano grin full of keys
hammering sweeps. She shot you
that mal de ojo, all black holes, and you
still smell her sweat, her stale breath,
feel its fire in your lungs. *I cheated her
three times, you say, now she sprints
inside my chest. Now she’s neck and neck.*



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