

The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez

By Iliana Rocha

103 pp. Tupelo Press.

“The Wandering Shape of You”: Evidence and Recollection in Iliana Rocha’s *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez*

Review by Tara Ballard

With every poem in *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez*, I am reminded of these words: “America, we should all be groping the wounded curves of your atlas,” words that Iliana Rocha includes in her resonant monostich, “AZO Elegy” (82); and like this one-line elegy, Rocha’s newest collection of poems at once grieves with a palpable hurt and speaks truth to power, revealing and confirming what has long been manipulated for profit through tabloids and reality TV or pushed to the periphery of social concern. Rich in imagery and provocative in construction, Rocha’s *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez* is a collection that hits the core of human existence.

The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez chronicles the murders of those who are often forgotten by society, but not by their loved ones. Rocha re-members the murder of her own grandfather, Inocencio Rodriguez, imagining and reimagining his last moments and constructing the years experienced by her grandmother, María Isabel Rodriguez, before and after his death. It is through Rocha’s vivid retellings, and patchwork testimonies, that the life lost is regained, confirmed in the poems’ renderings:

The only
machete he ever used was to crack a coconut. The past, constantly being
replaced with itself, & we were told never to speak ill of the dead. (85).

In this, Rocha too addresses the many women who have gone missing from states like Michigan, Texas, and Oklahoma, providing contextual notes, providing names, and proving their existence, while also evincing the deaths of immigrants from Mexico. Rocha writes:

what violence gives
back to us is more of itself, & power gives us *delete, delete,*
delete...

....this is not plagiarism—this is
history in circles. (57)

Rocha’s poems exhibit dexterity in their sense of craft and form, as Rocha interweaves the traditional expectations of the villanelle with villanelles that have been remixed and redacted, or bent in structure (“White Mexican Girl”; “Tabloid for JonBenét Ramsey”). Before and after these Rochan villanelles, come a number of elegies and prose poems (“The Girls Gone Up in Smoke”), where the stanzagraphs demonstrate the tension of the form in conjunction with the content, wedding the two together while calling attention to media—articles, reports—that gain capital off the lives of the disappeared or murdered.

As form creates meaning in *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez*, so too does repetition. Like a tapestry woven where patterns repeat, where colors intertwine, Rocha weaves together poems of the same subgenre, title, or similar title, so that one poem holds within it an echo of many others. In the four sections of the book—“Bad Hombre,” “In the Place of

Guesswork,” “Hoax,” and “True Crime Addict”—there are thirty-three poems written in prose, two poems that push one line beyond the sonnet, nine villanelles or villanelle remixes, four elegies, seven “Tabloid for...” and two “Landscape with...” poems, and two requiems. What strikes me, as a reader, from the first page to the last, are the number of poems with the same title, “The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez”: twenty-six, in total. And what does this do, what does this achieve? As I read, I am overwhelmed by the repeat loss, the repeat grief, and wondering, and questioning, the vacuum left behind for family members to navigate. In one such “Many Deaths” poem, the speaker composes in direct address:

I write to you tonight, grandfather, Inocencio,
in hopes that if I say your name enough, it might
be the truth...

...That you were luminous despite your wartime.
That the inverse of collapsing is the earth repeating
God through its Richter. I’ve found you again in the void,
bludgeoned with flowers your memory, larger
& endless like a cloud’s exit. (90)

Poems like Rocha’s “Texas Killing Fields” (49), “Chelsea Bruck Requiem” (28), and “True Crime Addict” (68; 92) call to mind the conversation present in Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* and Sergio Delgado Moya’s *The Facts of Violence and the Function of Sensationalism*, both of whom—while writing in different genres, contexts, and positionalities—boldly document tragedies faced by marginalized individuals and tragedies not often given the attention needed for discovery or resolution. Reading Rocha’s poems, I think of Moya’s essay “An Archive of Violence,” where the role of tabloids is addressed in their pulling together “the obscene and the sensationalized”—which “works mostly in the service of power, in perversely efficient ways, by keeping certain kinds of violence (violence against poor and racialized women, for instance) both out of sight and overexposed” (210).

Rocha’s poems immerse themselves fully into this troubling reality and require me as a reader to acknowledge what society does not aim to resolve. Rocha holds each reader responsible. How necessary is *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez*. How important these poems are—as documentary, as knowledge, as truth-telling humanity.

Iliana Rocha’s *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez* reveals many histories of violence at the personal, familial, and national levels and reveals our shortcomings, and failures, in valuing the desire for a well-lived life. It is in *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez*—through Rocha’s beautiful, difficult gatherings of meaning and memory—that Rocha invites readers to consider what happens before and after the missing, to consider the purpose and power of elegy, and to awaken our eyes and ears to what could be preventable in a symphony of loss.