

Birth Witness

By Ophelia Zepeda, from *Where Clouds are Formed*, University of Arizona Press, 2008

My mother gave birth to me
in an old wooden row house
in the cotton fields.
She remembers it was windy.
Around one in the afternoon.
The tin roof rattled, a piece uplifted
from the wooden frame, quivered and flapped
as she gave birth.
She knew it was March.
A windy afternoon in the cotton fields of Arizona.

She also used to say I was baptized standing up.
“It doesn’t count,” the woman behind the glass window tells me,
“if you were not baptized the same year you were born
the baptismal certificate cannot be used to verify your birth.”

“You need affidavits,” she said.
“Your older siblings, you have some don’t you?
They have to be old enough to have a memory
of your birth.
Can they vouch for you?”
Who was there to witness my birth?
Who was there with my mother?
Was it my big sister?
Would my mother have let a teenager watch her giving birth?
Was it my father?
I can imagine my father assisting her with her babies.
My aunts?
Who was there when I breathed my first breath?
Took in those dry particles from the cotton fields.
Who knew then that I would need witnesses of my birth?
The stars were there in the sky.
The wind was there.
The sun was there.
The pollen of spring was floating and sensed me being born.
They are silent witnesses.
The do not know of affidavits, they simply know.

“You need records,” she said.
“Are there doctor’s receipts from when you were a baby?
Didn’t your parents have a family Bible, you know,
where births were recorded?
Were there letters?
Announcements of your birth?”

I don’t bother to explain my parents are illiterate in the English language.
What I really want to tell her is they speak a language much too civil for writing.
It is a language useful for pulling memory from the depths of the earth.
It is useful for praying with the earth and sky.
It is useful for singing songs that pull down the clouds.
It is useful for calling rain.
It is useful for speeches and incantations
that pull sickness from the minds and bodies of believers.

It is a language too civil for writing.
It is too civil for writing minor things like my birth.
This is what I really want to tell her.
But I don't.
Instead I take the forms she hands me.
I begin to account for myself.