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Influenced by Karankawa Indians, poet explores how we create personal histories

PITTSBURGH—Iliana Rocha’s debut collection Karankawa, winner of the 2014 Donald Hall Prize for Poetry, examines some of the ways we construct, or reconstruct, our individual histories. “Rich in family narratives, myths, and creations stories, my poems investigate passage: dying, coming out, transforming, being born—as well as the gaps that reside in our stories,” Rocha stated. “The opportunity to create myths is provided by great silences.”

Rocha explained that she was inspired by the Karankawa Indians, who lived along the Texas coast of the Gulf of Mexico. “Their history works in omissions,” she said. “My collection reconfigures such spaces, engaging with the burden and freedom of memory, in order to rework and recontextualize private and public mythologies. First and last, these are poems that honor our griefs and desires, for they keep alive the very things we cannot possess.”

Native American poet Joy Harjo, who selected Rocha for the Hall prize, said Karankawa “embodies a fresh kind of creation story emerging from the Americas. We are struck by an unabashed presence of a fearless singer.”

According to Harjo, “These are the poems of a new fire. Raw fire makes a unique trail as it burns. They are fueled by a passionate, lyrical surrealism. This is a border politics kind of surrealism, emerging from a poetic sensibility in which there are no borders.”

Rocha is a PhD candidate in English with a creative writing emphasis at Western Michigan University. She earned her MFA in creative writing from Arizona State University, where she was poetry editor for Hayden’s Ferry Review. Her work was chosen for the Best New Poets 2014 anthology and has appeared or is forthcoming in Blackbird, Yalobusha Review, Puerto del Sol, and Third Coast. A native of Victoria, Texas, she resides in Portage, Michigan.

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