

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

*Mike Cole*

### **Malinche**

On the bus to Malinche,  
the volcano named for the Nahau woman  
who was at Cortez's side  
as he brought the Aztecs to God,  
small women with skin almost black  
and a mystery deep in their eyes  
came aboard with baskets  
for mountain strawberries,  
and their men carried rifles  
with taped and wired stocks  
to hunt for the day's meat.

They spoke in a tongue I'd never heard,  
the language of Malinche herself,  
Nahuatl, the treasure they kept  
through the millennia of conquests.  
When I asked Gustavo  
whose flesh was as dark  
as these small, quiet people  
about the history of his blood,  
he said only, "We are all Mexicans,"  
but when we toured the cathedrals of Puebla  
he didn't kneel and cross himself,  
and he smiled at the odd offerings  
left at the shrines to the Virgin.

At Malinche's crest we leaned  
against the metal cross and stared  
into the dead crater  
and across the valley of green rectangles  
to a layer of storm dividing the sky.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

And later as I followed Gustavo's voice  
down through the swirling belly of cloud,  
he told of the ghosts  
of those who had died on the mountain  
and how a spirit always found him  
and led him out of the cloud.  
Then he talked of climbing the two greatest  
volcanoes in the same day,  
and when he said their names,  
Popocatépetl and Iztaccihuatl,  
it was as if he were naming gods.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

### Dragon

To buy this dragon with splayed pink feet,  
and vertical eggs for eyes, a blue flame tongue  
and a skin of hand-painted dots  
in bright colors like the scales of a lizard  
or surreal ceramic tiles inspired  
by a god I could never know,

I wove my way through a city-sized market  
past dark women carrying the smell of tortillas,  
among rows of black pottery,  
pyramids of mangos and guavas,  
weavers back in the shadows  
bent beneath their blankets  
working without watching their hands  
whispering in the Mixteca dialect,

to the dust and pot holes of the Oaxaca bus station  
asked the way to Arasola, squeezed my knuckles bloodless  
holding on to the seat in front of me as the driver  
hit 70 even with the strange howling somewhere  
in the driveline, racing the other buses  
to the next stop for the few fares,  
watched the blur of oxen pulling a wooden plow,

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

stepped off at a wide intersection  
in the middle of a landscape that is always green,  
chose to walk the four miles to the village  
instead of taking one of the country taxis  
filled with whole families, gazed up  
at hedges of bougainvillea, fallen giants  
of Tule trees, passed hobbled cows tended  
by an old man who called me to him  
in a toothless slur of a Spanish  
I barely understood, asking for a little change,

was met a ways up the rocky, rain-soaked road  
by three barefoot brothers who knew exactly  
why I was there and took me to their brother-in-law's studio shack  
where the gentle man showed me his small collection  
of armadillos, serpents, winged dragons in bright colors  
and the one I'll always see, not quite finished  
but already sold to another American for \$250, the rearing  
stud horse with a serpent sucking its disproportionate cock,

bought one of the armadillos for his asking price  
because I don't bargain with artists  
followed the boys to their aunt's house,  
the only stucco in town with a concrete driveway,  
was led into the garage where  
dragons, panthers, snakes, and strange birds  
were arrayed, chose one  
and then as it was being wrapped  
stood at the door of another room  
where six girls painted dots  
on the ranks of creatures, giggled  
as girls their age will and told me they worked all day  
and didn't go to school, and, according to the taxi driver who threw  
his coke bottle out the window with one hand as he adjusted  
the radio with the other made less than a dollar a day American,

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

caught the last bus back to the city, saw just the top  
of the 2,000 year old Tule tree where tourists stop to gawk,  
carried my dragon on the nine hour bus ride back  
through the mountains to Puebla, then on the plane  
to LA sitting next to the old woman from the Philippines  
who had saved 40 years to visit the Shrine of the Virgin de Guadalupe  
where I had seen other old women crawling on bare knees  
across cobblestones to stand among the penitents singing,  
then back here where the dragon fell off a table  
and the wings and one spine snapped off  
and are lying beside it still in a brown paper bag  
high on a closet shelf.

**Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1**

**Hotel Puebla**

*México – June, 1989*

He was down in the street,  
as is the tradition,  
beneath the balcony  
onto which her light shone.

Granted, his drunkenness  
resulted in a garbling of the words,  
and he wobbled in a circle  
and fell more than once,

but still there was such sweetness  
and obvious anguish in his voice  
that it seemed beyond cruelty  
when the curtains closed  
and her window went dark.