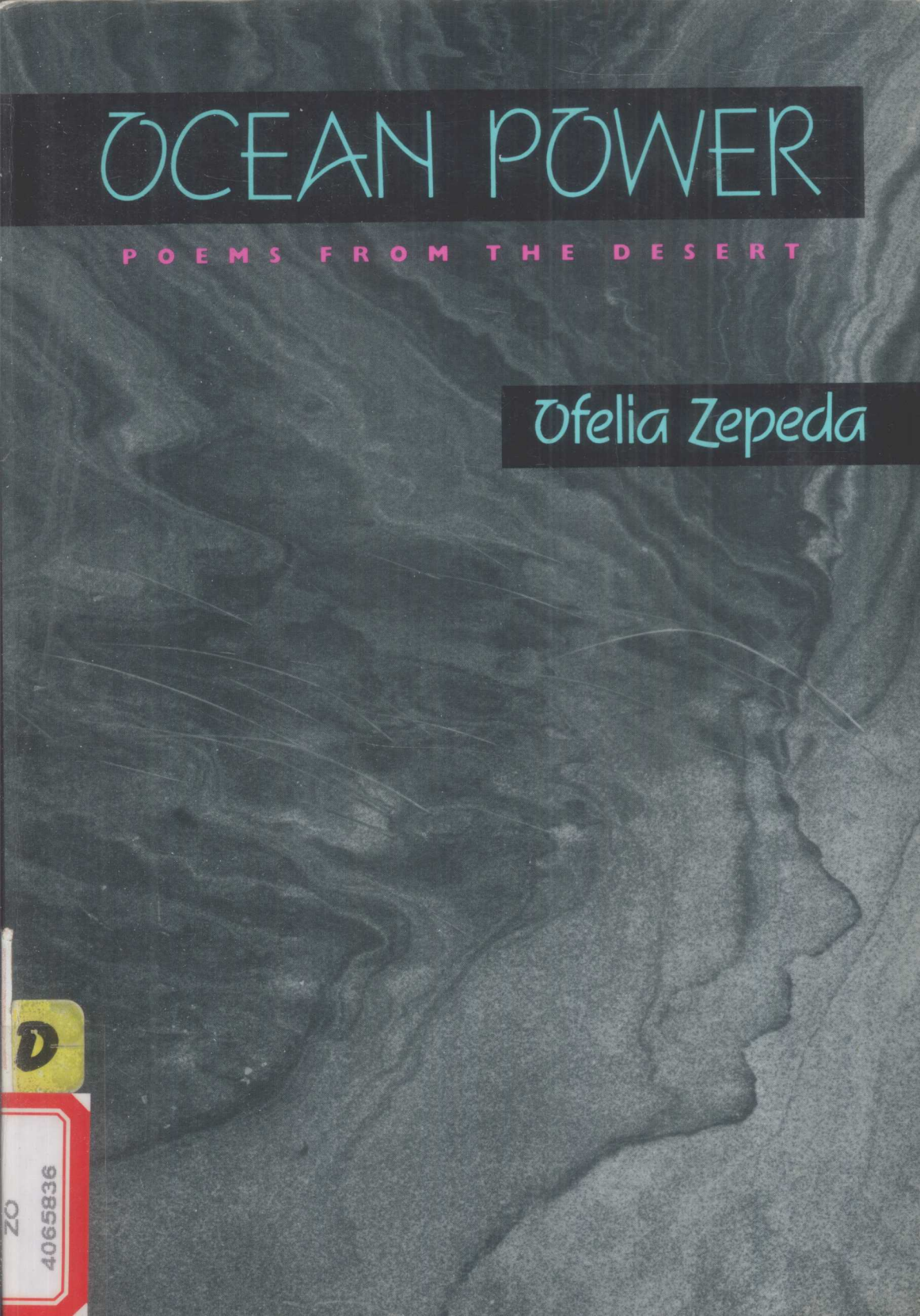
OCEAN POWER

POEMS FROM THE DESERT

Ofelia Zepeda



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About the Author

Ofelia Zepeda is a member of the Tohono O'odham (formerly Papago) tribe of Arizona. She was born and raised in Stanfield, Arizona, a rural cotton-farming community near the Tohono O'odham reservation. She holds a master's degree and a doctorate in linguistics from the University of Arizona.

Dr. Zepeda authored the first grammar of the Tohono O'odham language, *A Papago Grammar* (University of Arizona Press, 1983). She also has been a contributor to several collections of Native American literature, including *The South Corner of Time* (1981), *Returning the Gift* (1994), and *Home Places* (1995), all in the Sun Tracks series published by the University of Arizona Press.

Ofelia Zepeda is an associate professor in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Arizona, Tucson. She has taught courses on the O'odham language, American Indian linguistics, American Indian language education, and creative writing for native speakers of Southwest Indian languages. She is currently series editor of Sun Tracks.

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Introduction

Things That Help Me Begin to Remember

In the dark shadows of an early summer morning, the muffled movements in the outdoor kitchen filter around the corner where we sleep. My mother and her mother begin preparations for the day. The kerosene lamp is the only light until the fire is started in the adobe cooking stove. The crackling of dry desert wood always sounds the same, its odor is always familiar. The wood lights quickly and heats up fast. The pots and pans hanging on the saguaro rib fence make soft clinks in the darkness. With muffled movements the two women prepare fresh tortillas, eggs, beans, and coffee for breakfast. They also prepare food for my uncle to take for his noonday meal. With the same quiet movements, the women set pots of food on to boil for the family's noon meal.

"

Like the people before them, these women gauged the movement of the summer sun and the amount of work that needed to be done. They worked carefully to get their heaviest household work done, work that would be too much

to carry out under the late mid-morning or afternoon sun. The women planned their day around the heat and the coolness of the summer day. They knew the climate and felt confident in it. They knew the weather and its movements.

They talked about it in their own way. They often laughed out loud at the dry thunderstorms that threatened, but were too weak to do any good. And they laughed in childlike manner when a thunderstorm arrived with all its bounty. During these storms they sat quietly watching the rivulets form on the dirt walls and small waterfalls pour from the edges of ramadas. I remember how these adults laughed at anyone who got caught in the rain and came running in drenched. They laughed at the way he or she might look, but they also seemed to laugh at the delight of the wetness, the thorough wetness. They laughed at the mud, the way it formed so instantly, magically, from just a few drops of rain. They laughed at the way it coagulated between the children's toes.

Like so many others, these women talked about the movements of potential rain clouds. They watched the sky more in the summer. They spoke of the clouds, the ones *"mat aṣ e-paḍc"* (that just ruined themselves). These were the clouds that fell apart, that did not build up enough to cause rain. These were clouds that people said *"aṣ t-iatogĭ"* (just lied to us).

"

Even before the clouds become visible, the other sensory nerves are affected. The odor of wet dirt precedes the rain. It is an aroma so strong for some that it wakes them from sleep. People like to breathe deeply of this wet dirt smell. It is the smell not only of dirt but of the dry bark of mesquite and other acacias. It is the smell of the fine dust that must settle on all the needles and spines of saguaro and all manner of cactus, the dust that settles on the fine leaves of ocotillo and other leafed plants. It is all those things that give off an aroma only when mixed by rain. It is all breathed in deeply.

"

I remember seeing the women do this. And when they breathed in, they would remark about the *si s-wa'us u:wï* (it smells like wetness). To the women, my mother, my grandmother, there was beauty in all these events, the events of a summer rain, the things that preceded the rain and the events afterward. They laughed with joy at all of it.

Simultaneously, they had an ever-abiding fear and respect for the other components of rain—lightning and flood. With the lightning, women stood and pressed themselves against the adobe walls, becoming part of the buildings. They shut their eyes to the brilliant, electrically charged colors of white and blue. They screamed at the thunder that followed. The men sat quietly, waiting it all out, powerless, all of them tasting the magnetized air at the back of their throats.

Flooding waters were a cautious gift. The women's fields were saturated with run-off from washes that flooded; but then there were the unusual cloudbursts or the continual rains that caused only flooding and damage. I have memories of flooding when my father worked the cotton fields. The cotton fields held hidden dangers. During sudden cloudbursts and extended rainfall, the volume of water in irrigation ditches multiplied in minutes. The workers in the fields ran to get across the ditches before the water rose too high or currents ran too swiftly. Perhaps they looked like pack animals crossing rushing rivers. The men rushed, each one helping the other to get across. Some of them fell into the water, grasping at the opposite bank for safety. The ditches held only five feet of water, but the current moved too quickly for anyone to be safe. The wives of the men waiting at home surely must have felt relief when my father's pickup truck came up the road with the men in the back. This broke the tension.

''

The rain breaks the tension for the desert. Relief. Cycles continue.

''

These are only some of the events that help me begin to remember, and the poems I include here are of some of those memories. Some of the poems and memories run into each other. Like my parents, I am aware of the movements of weather—rain in particular. I don't know why. It is just that way. So, many of the pieces in this collection are about events around rain—rain in the desert and events that result.

Others are stories about people, my extended family and relatives. I must apologize to my sisters if I make them cry by helping them to remember. I don't mean to make them cry. I only intend to help capture some of our collective memory.

As for the pieces that are written in O'odham, for the moment I will simply say that O'odham is my first language. I feel confident in the language and so am able to create pieces solely in my first language. Some of the pieces here have versions that also appear in English; however, all of the O'odham pieces originated in O'odham. For the pieces that appear only in O'odham, the English versions never occurred, so no versions of them exist in that language. The O'odham pieces could be meant for the small but growing number of O'odham speakers who are becoming literate. Here, then, is little bit of O'odham literature for them to read.

Finally, I acknowledge all those who continue to help me begin to remember. My family here in Tucson, Tony and Christina. My family and relatives who still live and work in the cotton fields of Stanfield, Arizona.

And I acknowledge my relatives and family who have already gone, those who lived farther south of here. Those who participated in the ritual of pulling down the clouds and fixing the earth.

All those who knew how to live toward the direction of the ocean.

ʔI-hudiñ g Cewagĭ

Pulling Down the Clouds

Pulling Down the Clouds

Ñ-ku'ibaḍkaj 'ant 'an ols g cewagĭ.
With my harvesting stick I will hook the clouds.
'Ant o 'i-wañ'io k o 'i-huḍiñ g cewagĭ.
With my harvesting stick I will pull down the clouds.
Ñ-ku'ibaḍkaj 'ant o 'i-siho g cewagĭ.
With my harvesting stick I will stir the clouds.

With dreams of distant noise disturbing his sleep,
the smell of dirt, wet, for the first time in what seems like months.
The change in the molecules is sudden,
they enter the nasal cavity.

He contemplates that smell.
What is that smell?
It is rain.

Rain somewhere out in the desert.
Comforted in this knowledge he turns over
and continues his sleep,
dreams of women with harvesting sticks
raised toward the sky.