

Poems

Elizabeth Scott Tervo

Doña Marina, Malintzin, Noble Lady

With gratitude for the scholarship of Camilla Townsend

Historians are colonizers too,
colonizers of hearts.
They taught us about the Conquest
and that carrier of destruction and disease, Cortés.
Central America has never recovered.

They told us he had a native girlfriend
who gave up her people's secrets
And betrayed the nation—for love.
Of course he threw her away on the sand
when he went to look for more gold.

You kept this story in your heart.
Whenever a man abandoned you, you remembered her
and the insulting name
they sometimes call her in Spanish.

But years later a scholar came
inspecting hidden manuscripts,
excavating memories buried in fading languages,
finding colorful fragments she pieced together
and held them up to the light
as a different landscape:

Once there was a noble girl, ancestress of kings,
trained in polity in her little kingdom
then handed off as high tribute to the Aztec empire
which sold her into slavery down the coast. Fools, to sow
the seashore with women who hated them
ripe for the arrival of floating castles
seeking allies.

Tenochtitlan.



Meeting of Moctezuma II and Hernán Cortés, with Malintzin acting as interpreter. Detail from a copy of the lost Lienzo de Tlaxcala, a 16th-century illustrated manuscript about the Tlaxcaltec people.

Delivered up a second time as a propitiatory gift to the armored Spanish men along with other girls, once sprinkled with holy water she took up her rank again: Doña Marina, Malintzin, Noble Lady: with poise, languages, and knowledge, she became the diplomat extraordinary and talked the coastal tribes to alliance. From the back of Cortes' horse she brought down the empire she hated and returned home as a victor beloved by everyone and having tried to soften the Conquest where she could.

So what does she say to you? Were you a girl insulted, betrayed, endangered, who lost everything, damaged and yourself the traitor of the nation? Or did you bring beauty, intelligence, and understanding to make the peace, to melt the ice, rebind the world . . . and even though you failed, were you not the bright spot in the sordid community, staying true to love right up to the end, refusing the offers of armored men and arriving home ten times more valuable than before?



The Blue Jay of Georg Wilhelm Steller

In winter Steller's Jay returns to us.
Big as a crow, metallic blue,
his head jaunty black with a tuft,
his neck slopes down to elegant shoulders. And so bold.
He lands on the railing, cocks his head
and looks through the window, squawking at me
to bring him seeds, nuts, or bread.
Once he saw me with a red balloon, across town,
and came hopping up to see if I was giving anything away.
Sometimes he brings me peanuts in the shell,
and once a turkey bone with a little bit of flesh.
His voice is harsh and wearisome
But I like the way he talks to me.
We know each other.

His bright eye shines like a star
out of his wintry night coat, but he is not stellar,
he is *Steller's*,
named for Georg Wilhelm Steller, born in 1709,
a naturalist and doctor,
who travelled with the Russian imperial expeditions,
up the Siberian Pacific coast.
Steller sailed across the Bering strait
as far as the Aleutian Islands
and drew gentle drawings of plants and animals
and collected them.
He named creatures unknown to Europe
such as Steller's eider, Steller's sea cow.

Somehow he knew that my jay, on the Pacific,
and the blue jay of eastern America
are related.
He paid attention to the people living in Kamchatka
and learned their ways, customs, animals, and plants.
He believed in their cure for scurvy: native grasses.
His boat's crew did not believe
and most of them died.

In Siberia Steller was made a magistrate.
The Tsars ruled from Europe that the local peoples
should not be abused, but gently taught and civilized.
Only saints listen to that kind of talk.
On the ground Cossacks decimated Kamchatka,
beating, raping, taking, demanding
More and more pelts and taxes.

Those in top authority, soft and highly educated,
whether in Saint Petersburg, Madrid, Brussels, or London,
speak nice words but always let the Cossacks do as they please.
Every nation has its Cossacks.

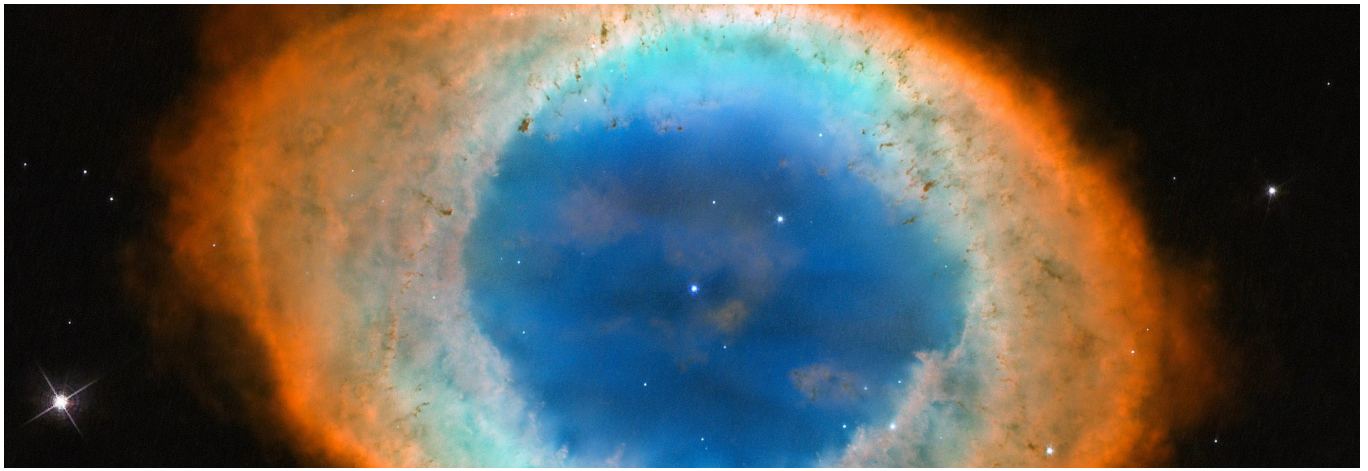
One time they arrested some native people as rebels
and brought them to Steller for punishment.
The villagers told him they were Christians
loyal subjects of the dear Tsar,
ready to die for him, if that was best.
Was this to be a holy martyrdom,
Christian love expressed in ultimate humiliation?
Had they become perfect Christians so naturally?
Or was it polite
diplomacy in their native language?
Whatever it was, Steller understood
and set them free,
for which he was himself recalled, arrested,
and died on the long snowy journey back, in Tyumen.
He was only thirty-seven and his pardon came too late.

His specimens and drawings were locked up in museums
for scholars.
The expedition's discoveries
of geography, local trails, natural resources, and inhabitants
became tools for imperial annexation,
like the maps made by anyone who
is eager and brave enough to be first
on any continent.
Tyrants ride on explorers' shoulders
and thugs crowd in behind them.

Many of Steller's creatures are gone or near extinction,
hunted to death,
and his research is obscure
except to those peoples he chronicled,
who now in tiny numbers, on a quieter day,
are reading his work
to find out who they are.

My Steller's Jay is not endangered,
he is 'of least concern.'
He does not know anything
about Steller and his long, cold voyages
or that such a gentle person ever existed
who travelled far from home
to study and name the creatures.





This poem was originally published in *Eye to the Telescope*, the online journal of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association, in 2020. It will eventually be part of a science fiction novel the author is writing about a Christian mission to warn the inhabitants of another planet about their impending conquest and colonization by Earth.

Solomonian

A vertical stroke
In his dark robe and cap
In a dark line of columns, in the shadows of columns
he is the only thing breathing
he breathes very seldom
but he is organic, no machine

His face is the same
His eyes are the same
His skin is the same—darker than our light
and lighter than our dark

He smiles. His teeth are like little moons.
He stands as we walk up
There is no clue
That his aorta branches to a heart on the right
And his blood runs with gold instead of iron
A secret vein for the conquerors

O protect him, set a veil
Around his sidereal system,
A second corona, a massive sunset
A golden, hiding haze and aureole around their sun. ✱



Elizabeth Scott Tervo's poetry and stories have appeared in *St. Katherine's Review*, the *Basilian Journal*, *Eye to the Telescope*, the *New Haven Review*, and Waystone Press's anthology *Visions of Paradise: Eucatastrophe*. Her memoir about the end of the Soviet period, *The Sun Does Not Shine Without You*, is forthcoming in the republic of Georgia. She is also co-coordinator of the Doxacon Seattle writers' group for Christianity and Science Fiction/Fantasy.