



English Studies in Latin America

Selected poems

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Selected Poems

Christopher Travis¹

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Christopher Travis

Crawdads
Rainy Lake, 2015

Last year we caught three or four. Well, this year
we saw five, but couldn't catch them. Hey, we studied them. We saw the way they
move.

Light through lenses of clouds
prisms of whitecaps
swirls of yellows, oranges and that other color
reflected in her eyes as she watches
he and grandpa
knee deep
floating and gliding
above the day
beyond the week
in the drops of life
on his olive skin

surplus value

when a five-minute storm
knocks down the door of trees
at the head of the lake
we watch in anticipation
of the gifts it brings

a sixteen-degree drop
from sticky sap to crisp spring

wakeful stagnation
turns into peaceful afternoon sleep

the trout are roused
from under rocks and fallen trees

the water cleaned and warmed
for late-night swimming

the radio and tv are mute
and we return to that book or that poem

and the romantic style that can be so tiresome
when it comes to poetry about storms
is awe, respect, and a bit of grace,
feeling we have no right to ask
for anything more

but,
the uniqueness of humankind
is not our opposable thumb
our ability to love and hate
or even our scientific method

it is our endless ability to take from the earth
so rather than silver, granite, or mahogany,
let us extract from the mines, quarries, and forests
one more resource

demand that the storm twist our words
cooling romantic diction
into conscious contradiction.

demand that the mines provide
a darkness never seen
that matches the opaque

devious ways of our leaders

call on the quarry to unearth a stone
so hard it cannot be
cracked by suicide bombs
so heavy it cannot be used to build
so smooth it cannot be written upon

explore the forests in search of a tree
whose leaves blur our vision into clairvoyance
whose fruit tastes only of water and air
and whose wood becomes poisonous
when cut.

then let poetry be written
upon paper from the tree
on a desk made of the stone
in the light of the mine
and it will be the measure
of what more verse can ask
from a storm.

The world of man

The world of man
is the white of the birch
and insects' home
scars, mold, and moss
ignored at it climbs.

Heaven is not the sky
but lies just beneath the surface of the lake
the rounded shell
window and door
to the darkness
of hibernating air

Our skirmishes are boats
Our battles are a fallen limb
Our stabbing knives let bloody syrup flow
And our wars will raise the water
pulling down Birch, Pine, Aspen, and Oak.

En esta hora tan muda (on the passing of José Emilio Pacheco)

In this so quiet hour, José Emilio,
you listen to the earth
the insatiable desert has
dried the salty shores of your memory
you return to a soil
for which we have no name
yet perhaps still ponder the perfection
of the caterpillar

and I here, among apparitions of Evanston late night fog
and the silence of howling cicadas in august

The sun has crossed the sky five hundred times now
since you left us

Y cada ola quisiera ser la última
Yes, each wave breaks, grips the sand
Like it is trying to find you
but falls back
warmer and deeper
convening retreat with octopus *su belleza nocturna*
and also the nocturnal beauty of gray whale.

You know I cannot sing an elegy
free from the misery of poetry *gastado vocabulario*
as I am here, beneath the sun, the rain,
the dust, the smog the night, among
los prisioneros de las palabras, prisoners of words flowing in poisoned waters and in my own testimony
to the ineffable moment, just a few words no longer poetry or even prose,
esto ya no es poesía,
like your caged monkey's monologue, the insects longing for the deep burn of the flame, birds
already incinerated by nuclear testing, fish by nuclear dumping, the millions of children whose
deaths broke through your sonnets and hendecasyllable are my three boys and their names, yes, we
had to form with the letters of our own dying language, no man's land, *tierra de nadie*, reification of
bajeza, vileza, and *putrefacción*, but those names belong to their own tongues and their own eyes. . .

green
hazel
and brown.

Since you asked many times, no. El mundo *no se ha acabado*.

The world has not ended.

In 2014 and 2015, strange years that you *y tus amigos Gelman and Galeano*, have now missed, they
fought burning forests and tried, at record pace, to tear down others
they pray for droughts to end or to find the trapped children below the rubble

while blasting billions of gallons back into the earth's angry spine
they want to drive more ships through the soils, ferns, and bright frogs
that were your neighbors

and my words, *unas cuantas palabras*, are cut flowers, sealed in a bottle
that spins in the gutter of this Chicago street
words that I will not stop painting, as you would have it
and I may fail, as you would have it,
again tomorrow

por intentar lo imposible.