TROPICALIA

EMMA TRELLES

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Introduction to the Poems

Tropicalia is, first and foremost, an atmosphere. Walking into these poems, one enters a soundscape where something akin to a heavy bass line underscores the scenery. Scraps of music and conversation mingle with the narration, and the rest is echo, feedback. Visually, the effect is pure motion, a long camera sweep of overpasses and street signs, tract houses, palm trees, gardens, weeds—all blown through with a language as insistent as a hot summer breeze.

When the dust settles on these pages, we find ourselves inhabiting a dialogue, a confession, a rant. What Emma Trelles offers us is a bridge to the other side of the argument, and a keen, almost mystical interaction with her surroundings that ultimately questions more than it reveals:

Because the land is covered in salt.
Because the land will not cede.
Because I am rejected.
Because I am released.

* * *

Tropicalia borrows its title from the Brazilian art movement of the same name, a vibrant blend of genres and styles that colored the international arts scene in the late ’60s and early ’70s. Edgier and more savvy than the flower-power hippie culture of its neighbors to the north, its vast creative energy drew from many different sources to shape a new hybrid most strongly felt in music, but also visual and performance art, poetry, film, and fashion.

As mirror, Tropicalia the book brings a similar energy to the mix. Trelles imbues her odd brew of poetic styles and voices with a strong visual sense. The result is a narrative infused with
a powerful physicality of place. In keeping with the cinematic
spirit of the poems, roads tangle and split, blacktop sizzles.
Expressways crisscross the city and interstates cut the rain-
soaked, verdant land in two. Color is provocation, and Trelles’s
own rustic palette provides the perfect hues. This is part and
parcel of gritty, urban South Florida, where love ticks quietly in
the shadows while the rest of the story is pure movieland circus,
a place where Santa Barbara holds court with beer-drenched
tourists and mystics and the future is a bus ride to anywhere
(“. . . the autopsy glow of the No. 9 / speeding through the beau-
tiful shadows / made by caged windows and weeds”).

In this nick-of-time road trip, the squeal and hum of the tires
is as universal as prayer, voices raised to a ramshackle religion
where the disenfranchised “pray for clarity, pray for vengeance,”
but also “where the sky at dusk is an altar / Chagall would have
painted with his plain-faced angels.”

Born from the clarity and distance of the involved observer,
Trelles’s slice of under-the-wire salvation is both the joy and ge-
nius in these poems. Beneath the “concrete and salt” of urban
collapse and suburban sprawl, gardenias swell, the air around
us is a chorus, the heart strains, the land takes us in. When the
momentum finally slows, the hard edges have softened into
something much more engaging and true.

—Silvia Curbelo,
Judge
Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices . . .

—The Tempest
PART I
Some of the Reasons

Because there is a window.
Because there is rain.
Because the sky is a vault that houses the past.
Because there is a child and a father.
Because there is ruin.
Because it is the hour of visions and failing blue.
Because my lies are also the truth.
Because I love the alleys’ footnotes and the just bridges of the bay.
Because I love the gravel rooftops and sentinel antennas.
Because there is an orange stripe of dusk in the west.
Because young men circle their bikes and sell respite.
Because they sell the promise of the noose.
Because the band was nomadic and took my head along.
Because a guitar is a box of air.
Because I can sing.
Because he pedals when he sleeps.
Because he kneeled and because he asked.
Because the land is covered in salt.
Because the land will not cede.
Because I am rejected.
Because I am released.
Because pelicans have returned to fish the inlet.
Because the moon is quartered.
Because the airport rises from the dark in a castle of light.
Interstate Song

On the drive home, a glory of crimson
lilies in the weave beside the blacktop,
a tangle of sawgrass and tupelo I imagine
leads to kingdoms of forgiveness, if only I could
find the doorknob, swing a square open and walk into
amnesia rain, drops shaped like doves and Pan-boys
humming and combing their beards. Of course
there would be smears of winged glitter
flying between the flame and the wick, voices
pitched in the perfect key of carnival glass.
I want to know what burrows beneath the eye.
I want to write *sky pearls* and see those two words
beaded together, what the great poet saw
when he looked up and traced
a chain of white buckets, a fit of summer
clouds glazing light and light glazing
the gutter puddles. Everything looks better in a poem,
or worse, depending on how much of the day you were able
to hoard and how much you gave and gave, and you’re running
out of time, from the past, you’ll climb into a cannon,
goggles tight and ears braced for the azure boom into the future:
a still life and the absence of mirrors and blades,
a palace where the cakes are laced with berries and you
have arrived, face smooth and tongue without doubt.
From the Shorecrest, Miami Beach

for Lee Anderson

What else would we have done with ourselves?
You wrote your way out of central Florida
land of camshafts and juke-punch psalms
an otherness so thick it sealed
your mouth with alien dust.
Mine was a death by Cuban-good-girl rules:
*Always wear lipstick*
*Worship the father*
*Keep the true tongue still.*

 Somehow we found our way
to these Cadillac days, fat and floating
along Penn Avenue, where eyeless cops
brush by on bikes and the homeless knot
the corners in rags; at early light stereos
shake oaks with bass lines big enough
to bust the chest and coma heads wide open.

 Nights we squat on the stoop
drinking *cafetasos*, talking sex, cashless
wishes, Carver and the Coen brothers, and the parade
rolls by with queens and high-piled hair
first generation girls, black flares and volcanic lipstick
first generation boys strutting boots and cabochon eyes
and the Hasidics inside their dusty flapping suits
pupils unfocused, not wanting to see what has fallen on
this city in a wave of jeweled decay.