

# 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.

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*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 beautiful 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 genius 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 afraid; 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.