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Foreword Review

90 Miles: Selected and New Poems

Virgil Suarez
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The author joins the raft of exiled poets, writing about his and his family's journey from Cuba to Spain, and finally to the United States. All of these poems are haunted by what was left behind: a country, an identity, lush flowers, fruits, and women. In the United States, the family works hard, fighting against racism, poverty, and the memory of what they chose to relinquish.

In addition to six volumes of poetry, Suárez has also written four novels, two memoirs, and two story collections, and he edited a series of anthologies. The title of this compilation refers to the distance between Cuba and the United States, one that becomes unfathomable after years of exile. Suárez imagines others in his displaced state—Teiresias, Prospero, Tu Fu, and Li Po—out of country, time and language—in poems like "Shakespeare in Havana" and "The Old Soothsayer Enters Santiago de Cuba."

Their transportation illuminates the poet's sense of displacement, as he writes of Shakespeare: "Later, in his room, he will open the sea-facing windows, / take a deep breath of the fresh salt air and sigh, // a memory of homeland a stone's weight in his chest / and he thinks he understands what it is to live in exile." These lines typify the book's project, and he adds to them in "The Reconciliation Between": "for now, we wait, / wait out this rain between the shores of exile. While we wait, // we love, eat, drink; our children grow up knowing the difference / between here and there."

A more interesting project, though less well represented, is Suárez's interest in love between men—familial, platonic, sexual—invoking President Nixon and J. Edgar Hoover, among others. He searches for a way to access masculinity that honors the strength of the man/father without the brutality shown in "Bitterness." In that poem, the father washes the blood of horses off his hands, but it is not the blood that makes him brutal; it is his treatment of the mother. Throughout the volume, the father becomes an object of obsession, representing both strength and the old country, as well as lost potential and hope. He embodies the exile, lost between worlds, even more potently than the son.

Suárez's narratives tend toward the linear, often making a final leap in the last lines, turning back to the abstractions of memory and possibility. Sometimes the turn is earned; other times, it feels forced, revealing the effort behind the turn rather than the mystery of the epiphany. The music of the poems oscillates internally between the fluidity of a few Spanish words and the harsher syllables of English, offering a compelling sense of dislocation, true to the book's primary concerns. Readers interested in narrative poems about exile will enjoy the poem's and Suárez's mixture of American and Cuban culture.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (August 18, 2009)

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