



Across the Line / Al Otro Lado: The Poetry of Baja California

Harry Polkinhorn

Mark Weiss

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"The Line" is the border between California and Baja (or "Lower") California. Editor Polkinhorn's prefatory remarks illuminate the perils and marvels of this frontier, the literary and political significance of which is only recently coming to light. Polkinhorn, who has published more than thirty books of visual poetry, poetry, fiction, translation and scholarship, offers: "I was born within yards of the U.S.-Mexico international boundary ... in the heart of a mixed-breed culture split and joined by the suture of a chain-link fence with its police on both sides engaged in their futile and infantile games of trying to control the spirit of life, which goes where it wants according to its own laws."

An excellent introduction by editor Weiss, author of five poetry books, vividly paints the political background out of which more than fifty new poets arise—long decades of both internal and external strife, punctuated by assassinations, uprisings, riots, and repressions on both sides of the border.

There is in many of these poems the sense of a voice just awakening to itself, long poems with short lines, a tumbling of syllables down the page, as though in pursuit of an image lost and the poet's breathless search for its rediscovery. A number of the writers have left the small towns and villages, the scattered collections of shacks and rutted paths littering the desert or the mountain terrain where they grew up thirsting for a wider life. Some have returned; others remain distant but torn with the memory of a lost land.

"Tijuana," by Jose Javier Villarreal, exemplifies the tone of the collection: "This city wounds like a fishbone stuck in our throats."

In "Forgive Me for Not Being Blind," Ruben Vizcaino Valencia writes: "This is my true impoverished home / and these my brothers and sisters / ulcerated, sniveling, dying of gangrene / beneath the canopy of tourist lights."

Over all, a thin haze of anomie pervades, pierced with either anger or nostalgia, and always the persistent question: "How could this have been?" or "How can this still be?"

These poems are not all of the same quality, but each poet speaks with an individual voice: the young, the elders, the politically robust, the emotionally profligate. Of particular interest are the first poems in the collection, a group of indigenous voices whose works have been translated first into Spanish from their native language, and then into English. The result has a haunting similarity to the ritual chants of many Southwest American Indian groups.

The translations are superlative. It is clear that an enormous amount of work has been invested in this project, and everyone involved has earned a vote of thanks for this latest effort toward amity and the search for a common voice in international relations much closer to home than many of us might realize.

SANDY MCKINNEY (March / April 2003)

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