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FOREWORD REVIEW ♥♥♥♥♥ SHORT STORIES

Paraíso Portátil / Portable Paradise

Mario Bencastro
John Pluecker, translator
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By turns strange, moving, shocking, and illuminating, *Paraíso Portátil* offers an unflinching look at life for immigrants and their struggle to find better lives in America. In this bilingual collection of short stories and poems, the pieces are thematically arranged to show the whole spectrum of the immigration experience: newcomers who have it comparatively easy, and those who suffer at the bottom of the barrel. In both cases, Bencastro asserts, any immigrant has no power in the world—anything he has, be it money, home, family, or love, can be taken from him at any moment.

Bencastro is a prize-winning author from El Salvador, who has often written on the subject of immigration and political conflict. His passion is evident in *Paraíso Portátil*. He says, “Life for immigrants is divided in two…the seasons pass, the harvest ends in one place and starts in another; the immigrants come and go, forever guided by the compass of work.” He cites the terrible statistics for deaths and disappearances. And his characters, the men and women who struggle so hard for freedom, give a face to the numbers. A ship’s captain leaves Haiti with a load of passengers, hoping to make it to Miami, Florida, in three days. Their voyage ends over three months later, when the survivors have resorted to cannibalism. In another story, a boy is murdered when he refuses the sexual overtures of a stranger. In both cases, Bencastro says, justice was not served. His lines, though stiffly translated to English, ring out: “The fallen immigrants are people with no faces. The wind has erased their names, the river their dreams, the desert their bodies.”

The repetition of these sad stories is overwhelming at first; the reader doesn’t want to believe that all of this is true. But the collection compels attention. The stories represent an unusual perspective in literature, and one that is not often read in North America. Far from glamorizing the immigrant’s struggle—the characters are not portrayed as martyrs or saints—the stories and poems show the gritty world in which the lowest class of people live. It’s all here: how they make it to the United States, the price they’re willing to pay to stay here, and how amazingly simple non-immigrant lives are in comparison—as well as the faith in a better future all immigrants hold close to their hearts.
CLAIRE RUDY FOSTER (April 15, 2010)

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