FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Vermeer's Milkmaid and Other Stories
Manual Rivas
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Vermeer's Milkmaid is the work of a poet. With a myriad of quirky characters and imagery that captivates the far reaches of the imagination, Manuel Rivas crafts miniature worlds that manage to be as peculiar as they are spectacularly ordinary.

This collection is a return to a region of Spain riddled with a history of military combat, dictatorship, and religious persecution. His portrayal of Galicia, though fantastic at times, does not attempt to avoid the stark realities that have haunted *Gallegos* over the decades. In "Butterfly's Tongue," for example, a young student named Sparrow experiences the collision of youth and violence during a time of religious and military expansion. Much like his namesake, Sparrow exists in a world apart from his surroundings, one in which he dreams of taking flight to escape hard times. Despite the threat of being sent to work, Sparrow spends his days in the classroom, awaiting the arrival of a microscope from a government that is barely able to hold itself together. His teacher turned mentor, Don Gregario, assures him that they can see the ethereal intricacies of a butterfly's tongue through the tiny lens: "He talked to us children so much about how that apparatus made minute, invisible things bigger that we ended up really seeing them, as if his enthusiastic words had the effect of powerful lenses." Writing about a region engulfed in social turmoil, Rivas is wise to avoid the overtly political, and instead focuses on the nuances that Don Gregario brings out in Sparrow's life. Though there are constant reminders of the violence that exists beyond youth, Don Gregario provides a protective cocoon that preserves Sparrow's world.

A gifted poet, Rivas' skill lies in his ability to construct a world which is both absurd and strangely real. It is through the juxtaposition of these seemingly opposite realms (youth, fantasy, violence) that he is able to summon social and political commentary without the heavy-handedness of most political fiction. Much like Don Gregario, Manuel Rivas' words evoke the power of a microscope. His ability to transform political realities into works of poetry that enrapture the imagination makes him a valuable lens through which to understand our politically

torn world.