

Two Poems by Fernando Fernández

Alicia among the Asps

She came on the saint's day of Hipólito, on the arm of María
—that daughter-in-law of hers
from Nayarit
who stayed in the house for centuries after that
(and who is always associated in my mind
with the smell of moth-balls).

I recall her exactly, in the doorway, under a lightbulb,
where I saw her
for the first time: she already was dyeing
her lank hair gleaming black.

Alicia scrutinized everything with a distant gaze,
inquiring of each
apparition that passed before her eyes
from behind her bottle-bottom lenses.

She piled up a votive offering of saints and candles
and flasks on the sideboard of the servant's room.

In payment for prodigies rendered,
for years she bestowed pesos on a bust of San Judas
—which kept
watch over the garage— shuffling in the dark
at the saint's feet naked under her dressing robe.

Alicia lifted her face like a magnanimous toad, her bleary eyes
immobile,
drowned in the television screen.

With filthy fingernails she dismantled
tangerines,
disemboweled biscuits, attacked the senile
rust bedeviling wicker furniture.

She liked to crunch the peels and seeds or nutshells using her right
index finger
to make her mouth reverberate,
and then she would chomp with her mouth empty,
as if she were chewing
nonexistent food.



(Sometimes she let her hair
down loose,
which added a dramatic note to her twisted silhouette
and contrasted with the faded gray of the iris of her eyes).

Benighted and beautiful old
woman,
she told me my destiny was written in heaven, clearly
propitious and indelible.

I drifted away into inclement fictions inspired by her
situation:
“Little master,” Alicia might tell me, “this here is Minga,”
and she would go on to display with veracious pride the secret
marvels of her fondest granddaughter.

The very same year my parents separated,
with the oncome of the rainy
season,
Alicia became ill —the pain gave her skin a pallid
hue and she raged in demented humors.

Badly informed and at the last minute,
we visited her house to find her in a deranged bed, potbellied
with liver cancer... (I had my first true portent of death
in that bedroom).

Among feverish icy rags and frigid embers
her soul struggled like a blackbird in a basket of asps.

When she glimpsed my father, oh Alicia flung herself to kiss
the palms
of his hands, while she pleaded with hushed cries,
and explicit gestures, his pardon
barely comprehensibly.

The pious Magnificat and an ancient
scapulary peered out from between her breasts
fallen
under her agonizing bed-shirt.

A few meters from the ancestral cornfield
which her relatives were already arguing over, surrounded
by obsequious daughters and avid
sons-in-law,
she died in that spot, right there, under an undistinguished
gray roof.



Translated by John Oliver Simon

The Hero's Soliloquy at Churubusco

I came early, my heart in sad commotion,
to Tuesday's meeting in the Chamber.

A certain, let's say, spiritual necessity
made me direct my footsteps
toward a nearby church
with the idea of saying an Our Father.

The atrium was locked and so it was
impossible to pray in the chapel;
I wandered through the garden
and decided,
under the liquidamber trees of 10 to 5,
to lift my voice to heaven in search of consolation.

I didn't let that absurd incident
stop me;
raising my glance on high,
I sought some least attention.

But my eyes encountered only
a lone hero
—in between the two remaining
out of the actual seven cannon—,
under a canopy of eucalyptus.
Even he, I thought,
might listen to my painful
sighs, and maybe his bronze forehead
might possibly give me some notion.

Not appreciating the spontaneity
of my visit,
the military man looked down his nose
intent on ignoring whatever brought me there
—the meeting, after all, was in Holland.

Promptly,
however, with a clearly
mechanical accent
—as if said for the umpteenth time—,
in the inspired light of evening
and with some birds for audience
who were probably used to this speech,
I made out that he was mumbling
over and over:
*"Si tuviéramos parque, ustedes no estarían aquí."*¹



