

BOOK REVIEW | THE SHORTLIST

Mexico in Fiction

By LILI WRIGHT NOV. 18, 2016

I'LL SELL YOU A DOG

By Juan Pablo Villalobos

Translated by Rosalind Harvey

244 pp. And Other Stories, paper, \$15.95.

When a retired drunk named Teo moves into a roach-infested tenement in Mexico City, the building's "literary salon" hails him as an artist, an accolade he vehemently denies. Retired artist? they press hopefully. Frustrated artist? Novelist? Hardly. In his glory days, Teo ran a taco stand in the Candelaria de los Patos. The guests snatch back their fizzy wine in disgust.

The rest of Villalobos's savagely funny novel, his third, recounts the madcap residents' attempts to persuade the taco seller to fulfill his destiny and write a novel. Comic capers abound — more skits than plot. Teo rids his apartment of cockroaches by blaring Cuban ballads, encourages a Mormon missionary to have sex and recalls his mother's adoration of various pet dogs, a popular filling for tacos.

At times, this slender novel feels like a villanelle. Dogs, roaches, beer, Mexican muralists and credos from Theodor Adorno reappear in shifting incantations. Welcome are the rare moments of sincerity, usually in flashbacks. When Teo's mother and sister perish in the 1985 earthquake, their bodies are never recovered. "What was being buried, if anything, and not even this, was memories, nothing more."

Few cultural icons escape Villalobos's dart. One tenant dies reading Carlos Fuentes. "Ulysses" is employed as a terrorist weapon. But if the quest for posterity

is bosh, what's the alternative? A squalid life of tequila? On the last page, Villalobos concedes that a novel of dog-meat tacos — say, the one we are reading — is better than no novel at all.

THE INFINITE

By Nicholas Mainieri

373 pp. Harper Perennial, paper, \$15.99.

Luz Hidalgo is a high school track star in New Orleans, an illegal immigrant whose mother (now dead) claimed they descended from Guachichil warriors. When Luz meets Jonah, an orphan, the lonely teenagers connect spiritually, then sexually. Before long, Luz is pregnant.

Mainieri's propulsive debut is a double coming-of-age story that spans the border. Upon learning the news, Luz's furious father dispatches her to her grandmother in Las Monarcas, the Mexican town where monarch butterflies migrate each year. Lovestruck Jonah chases after her in an ill-fated road trip — no pesos, no Spanish — determined to convince her they belong together.

Heading south, Luz confronts a string of horrors: shootouts, drug lords, executions. In a clever twist of gender roles, Jonah, the innocent, dreams of settling down with their baby, while Luz discovers her inner narco, strapping a drug lord's knife to her calf. The cascading violence and coincidences stretch credibility, and the suspicion that Mexico is being painted in its darkest light isn't softened by one character's wooden pronouncement that "Mexico is still here — generous people and good food and the beauty of it all."

Still, Mainieri is ever sincere, eager to show how borders carve up land and families, and how the dislocated can be tempted by any semblance of human connection. But the novel's big ideas linger less than its intimate moments: two brothers cleaning fish, a grandmother's sigh. These fractured encounters reveal a different kind of border, the hurtful spaces between people who long to be close.

NORTE

By Edmundo Paz Soldán

Translated by Valerie Miles

326 pp. University of Chicago, paper, \$18.

This searing novel about three Latinos lost north of the border is not for the faint of heart. In the opening chapter, Jesús — based on a Mexican serial murderer known as the Railroad Killer — gang-rapes and stabs a prostitute. As Jesús, both victim and monster, slips into drugs, sexual abuse, psychosis, incest and necrophilia, Paz Soldán perfectly modulates the tension, evincing our sympathy even as we recoil.

A poignant second story line follows the outsider artist Martín Ramírez, who crossed into the United States as a day laborer. Mute and schizophrenic, Martín is locked in an asylum for 30 years. Feverishly, he draws trains, cowboys, churches. A professor ferries his work to galleries and the Guggenheim, then abandons him. Paz Soldán captures Martín's confusion and isolation: "He closed his eyes. Everything was much better that way."

Less interesting is the novel's third strand, involving a graphic novelist trapped in an abusive affair with a drug-addled literature professor. She stomps off, then limps back. Women don't fare well in these pages — abused, manipulated, raped, murdered or simply clueless.

"One should show compassion to all creatures scabbling along their path in life, should be willing to throw a cloak of pity over the shoulders of even a man like Jesús," the ranger leading the manhunt ponders. We don't forgive, but we understand. This is the Bolivian-born Paz Soldán's miraculous gift. With unflinching realism and steely grace, "Norte" reminds us why literature can do what journalism cannot: We inhabit the minds of people we'd prefer to forget.

AMONG STRANGE VICTIMS

By Daniel Saldaña París

Translated by Christina MacSweeney

218 pp. Coffee House, paper, \$16.95.

A vacant lot, a hen, used tea bags and masturbating twice on Saturday — these are the obsessions of Rodrigo, a 27-year-old loafer who drifts around Mexico City with autistic detachment. When an office joke goes awry, he marries his boss's spiteful secretary, Cecilia. Rodrigo prefers the hen. Then this craziness: Someone leaves a bowel movement right on Cecilia's tiger-print bedspread. Who could it be?

With little plot or dialogue, this farcical novel about inertia sustains momentum by the wit of its quirky Rube Goldberg prose. Great fun are the jabs at academia, Mexico City and the dusty town where the action, or inaction, moves after Rodrigo meets Marcelo, a Spanish cretin with a Ph.D. in aesthetics. These flameless *flâneurs* humph and hump, personifying urban malaise.

But the scatological humor gets old, and some sentences are maddeningly abstruse: “The devastation reserved for us by the confirmation of an ominous truth is more subtle than that offered by our first glimpse of that truth.”

This is París’s first work published in English, and it arrives at a delicate time. In these Trumpian days, it’s hard to laugh off the teenage nymph, Micaela, bought off her parents for 5,000 pesos, who has celestial sex and urinates a magical elixir that, mixed with tequila, helps four macho men see “the future form of art.” Micaela barely speaks. (Another woman is a deaf-mute.) Spoofing misogynists should be a double negative turned positive, but it doesn’t feel that way. When Rodrigo learns to “cultivate his garden,” we wish it happened to a nicer guy.

Lili Wright’s first novel, “Dancing With the Tiger,” was published in July.

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