

SONG OF THE HUMMINGBIRD

By Graciela Limon

Arte Publico. 217 pp. \$19.95; Paperback, \$11.95

THIS NOVEL shouldn't work; it's all predictable, this story of the "civilization" of the Americas. A sensitive priest sets out to convert an Indian and in the process begins to question his own people; the noble Indian is vindicated in the end. Yet Graciela Limon's tale is downright hypnotic.

It's the Indian narrator—the old crone "Hummingbird"—who carries it off. There are some extraordinary descriptions here of pre-Colombian culture. Hummingbird manages to pass along the personalities within the royal entourage, the power plays, the claustrophobia of some of the obligatory marriages, the rhythms of the snake dances. All of it in tight close up. And always there's the pounding in the language; Cortez is coming closer. Hummingbird ends up seeing it all. Her husband, a merciless abuser, is burned alive. "Tetla began to dissolve. His flesh became liquid; it dripped unevenly, running off his body in globs . . . What had once been Tetla became smaller, shorter, reduced first to the shortness of a stalk of maize, then to the size of those dwarfs who entertained Moctezuma, then smaller still . . ." Her child is killed soon after and with that Hummingbird takes a knife to her own face. Once she'd been beautiful; she wants to be beautiful no more. There's something so clean about her emotions, whether it's the sweetness of her murmurs to the spirits or the vengeance she takes on her Spanish lover. And there's a precision to her voice—a howl that is perfectly contained. Still she goes on with her account. Meanwhile the poor priest keeps trying just to get to the confession. The talk of snake dances is taking its toll. What makes Hummingbird so compelling has of course a great deal to do with what she's incorporated from a culture long destroyed. Spending some time with her makes its loss come alive.

A FIRE IN THE EARTH

By Marcos McPeck Villatoro

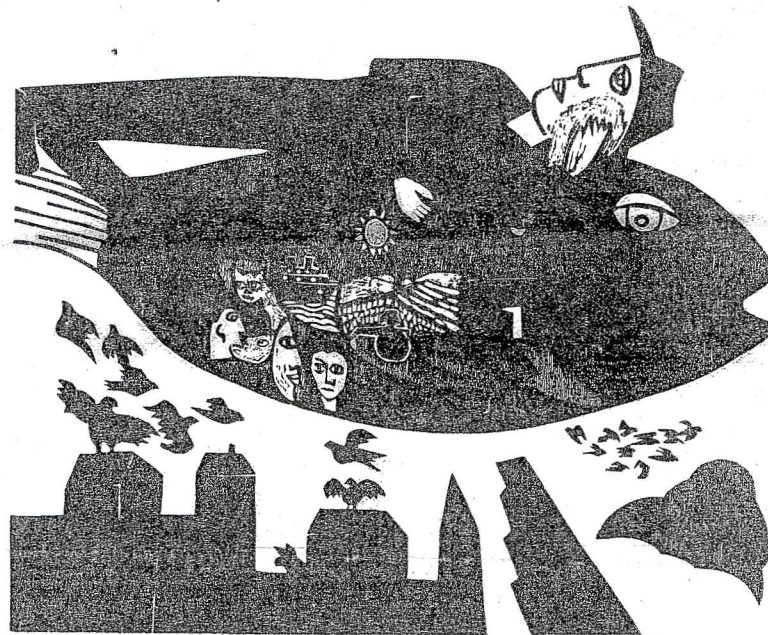
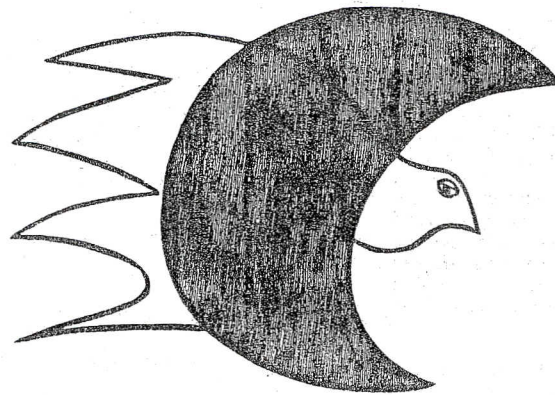
Arte Publico. 496 pp. \$24.95

IT'S NOT an easy task to tackle El Salvador. Just how does a writer make the story of so much repression and so much poverty readable? Over the last few decades it has been the poets perhaps who have been most successful, particularly Claribel Alegria and Carolyn Forché. Marcos McPeck Villatoro's epic—the story of several generations of one Salvadoran family—is less so.

The novel begins with a wonderful character, an old Indian visionary, too quickly gone from the scene. The pater familias depicted here feels so connected to the earth that his burial itself is a homecoming. There are sporadic bursts of writing as effective as this throughout the novel. The descriptions of the 1930 massacre—one that set the stage for all the atrocities to come—is another.

Villatoro clearly feels deeply for Salvador. What he may record best is the immunity of the wealthy, the pettiness that goes unexcused among much of that class.

Elizabeth Hanly frequently writes on Latin culture. She is currently at work on a book about Cuba, the body and prayer.



"DREAMS OF RETURN," A WOODCUT BY NAUL OJEDA (1984)

Yet, some of the key relationships in his story are poignant, tender; this isn't a novel easy to toss aside mid-way. The problem is that there are too few characters on any side with much breadth. Villatoro seems to be pushing his characters into his plot, trying too hard for grand cycles, trying too hard to tell Salvador's story. His characters suffer in the process. Indeed, the revolutionaries at the end of his story have little life at all. Villatoro's canvas is large and wide; his story might have been better if it weren't.

SENORA HONEYCOMB

By Fanny Buifrago

Translated from the Spanish
By Margaret Sayers Peden
HarperCollins. 232 pp. \$18

SENORA HONEYCOMB is a fast, sweet sip of a novel. It's a Cinderella tale, in which Teodora, our heroine goes through nearly the entire novel wait-

ing for her worthless philandering husband to consummate her marriage. In the meantime, anxious to support him, Teodora travels from her native Colombia to Spain and ends up working as assistant to a master baker of erotic cakes. The years go by. When finally she has money enough to come home to her husband and Colombia, she has preserved her maidenhead for him, but Cinderella now knows about "decorating her nipples, navel and knees with red and blue lotus flowers." She finds him in flagrante of course. And fat. "Her white knight? Was this a joke? This was a freshly butchered hog, scalded and scraped and cured with a bicarbonate of soda and saffron." What then?

There's a great procession of wry characters here, a wonderful Colombian town, with its various factions and gossip; everybody is always getting tangled up in everybody else's business. People bet on everything, including how many times a particular couple will climax in one after-

noon. None of the town's foibles, nor the rhythms of its people are lost in Margaret Sayers Peden's able translation. And there are edible delicacies. But I wanted more.

Buifrago's story doesn't have the underpinnings, the exquisite play of some of the masters—Brazil's Jorge Amado, for instance. It's the genre that works here maybe more than the story itself. Still *Senora Honeycomb*, a debut in English of the work of an established Colombian writer, is a delight.

BREAK-IN

By Jose Yglesias

Arte Publico. 226 pp. \$19.95

BREAK-IN is a quirky gem. It chronicles all the starts and stops of a relationship, and an unlikely relationship it is. Retired Florida fire-chief Rudy Pardo is your stereotypical grumpy old man. A bit of a racist too. Some tall skinny ghetto kid named Spider steals his old Mercury. And then he brings it back, not just the car, but everything that was in it: the sunglasses, the spare tire, the map, the MacDonald coupons. The fire chief ends up not only covering for the kid, but more or less wanting to adopt him too; the kid more or less agrees. The rest of the story is the sweetness between them.

All of this is told from the fire-chief's perspective, in language that is cranky, paranoid, ostensibly perfectly flat. He doesn't particularly trust what he's doing, he doesn't particularly trust Spider. But "there was something surprising and unknowable about the kid. It made him interesting, made you feel you were not just marking time when he was around." The truth is that they like each other.

There's a lot of loneliness in backdrop. A terrible lack of connection all around. A need to father and be fathered. But any talk of such big themes breaks the beauty, the balance achieved here. A day or two in a couple of lives.

THE SECRET OF THE BULLS

By Jose Raul Bernardo

Simon & Schuster. 301 pp. \$22

CUBAN MEN are like bulls, the author tells us. Their women have to learn to live with that. But the real secret, the author continues in this lengthy tale of two generations of one pre-revolutionary Cuban family, is that Cuban women are bulls too. More dangerous and powerful than their men. It's the power of Cuban women that gives their men their own. Well, Fidel might be surprised to hear it. This volume invites snide comments.

Some of Jose Raul Bernardo's characters here might have been engaging, and even perhaps are for a few pages. There's the son who was lent to his grandmother to ease her solitude and years later is left wondering if he really belonged to his family. There's an old servant who accompanies his mistress to her new husband and life, after she'd become persona non grata at home. There's another young husband who kills himself rather than live out life as a gay in macho Cuba. Bernardo's plot could have been interesting. It's just that the whole novel reads like a plot summary. There's no nuance here; nothing is developed. And so characters are trivialized, lost.

I wish some editor had pushed this writer to put aside cliché and do some justice to his story. And I wish the author had bothered to get his Afro-Cuban gods straight. Ogun is not the fierce god of the sea.