The Soft Land

“Few poets with so few words and, between lines, have told us so much, and so eternally, about their own land. López Velarde is also making history.” —Pablo Neruda

“The moment in which I read The Soft Land was one of the moments in my life of greatest literary exultation. We were in my house, on Quintana Avenue, and you (Borges) recited those lines to me about the paradise of compotes and I want to carry you away, in the gloom of Lent.” —Adolfo Bioy Casares to Jorge Luis Borges

“The Soft Land is born, it’s true, from the profound love the poet has for Mexico (...) in the poem (...) unfolds an intense affection toward our country—its small greatness and its great smallness.” —Carlos Fuentes

“The Soft Land could only have been written in Mexico. It’s like T.S. Eliot’s The Wasteland falling out of a piñata.” —Richard Blackmore
Ramón López Velarde (1888-1921) was a Mexican poet who incorporated techniques from French Symbolism into the treatment of Mexican themes. He studied law, and worked as a journalist and civil servant. His first book of poems, La sangre devota (The Pious Blood, 1916), treated the simplicity of country life, the tension between sensuality and spirituality, and the poet’s love for his cousin Fuensanta (Josefa de los Ríos); the language is often complex and full of daring imagery. In Zozobra (Uneasiness, 1919) the themes of his previous work were treated with greater intensity. The death of Fuensanta in 1917 elicited feelings of loss and anguish and the expressions of profound sensuality found in the poems. El son del corazón (The Sound of the Heart, 1932) collected those poems previously unpublished at the time of the author’s death. Although his work did not gain recognition during his lifetime, López Velarde later came to be considered one of the greatest Mexican poets of the century.

Gustavo Monroy was born in Mexico City in 1959. Since the mid-1980s he has gained considerable national and international attention, and is represented in museum collections in Mexico and the United States, including the Mexico City Museum of Modern Art, the Aguascalientes Museum of Contemporary Art, the National Museum of Prints, the National Institute of Fine Arts, and the Alvar T. de Carrillo Gil Museum of Contemporary Art in Mexico; and also in the University of Arizona Museum of Art and the Latin American Art Museum in Long Beach, California. A creator of paintings, prints and drawings, he is an active participant in Mexican cultural life and is the recipient of a number of awards, including the Painting Prize of the IX Rufino Tamayo Biennale.

Jennifer Clement is the author of several books including the novel Prayers for the Stolen and the memoir Widow Basquiat. Her new novel, Gun Love, which was the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, will be out in early 2018. Clement is the President of PEN International and lives in Mexico City.

Luis Miguel Aguilar was born in Chetumal, Quintana Roo, Mexico, in 1956. amongst his poetry collections are Medio de construcción, Chetumal Bay Anthology, Conversaciones con La Xtabay, Pláticas de familia, Las cuentas de la Iliada y otras cuentas. His chapbook, De varias formas, appeared in 2017.
La Suave Patria

The Soft Land

a poem by
Ramón López Velarde

with paintings by
Gustavo Monroy

translated by
Jennifer Clement

and an essay by
Luis Miguel Aguilar

Shearsman Books
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translated from Spanish by Tony Frazer
The Soft Land
SAMPLER
I, who only sang from the exquisite, intimate decorum score, now lift up my voice at center stage like a tenor who imitates the guttural modulation of a bass as if to carve out a slice of an epopee.

I will navigate through civil waves with weightless oars, which move like the arms of an emissary from the royalist Chouans who, with rifles, rowed across the English Channel.

I will muffle the tone of my epic. The Land is impeccable and diamantine.

Soft Land: allow me to clear you in the deepest jungle music with which you molded me whole to the lilting stroke of hatchets, among young women's laughter and cries and among birds whose trade is carpentry.