Eduardo Chirinos was born in Peru (Lima, 1960) and has published sixteen books of poetry in Spanish, the most recent of which won an international prize in Spain in 2009. This is the first collection of his poems to appear in English. The translated anthology reads as if it were originally written in contemporary American English, but it does not resemble most contemporary American poetry at all. It is distinctively modern, but clearly from elsewhere. This is quite a feat for the translator, and, in our view, speaks well for the poet.

“Clearly from elsewhere,” we say, and distinctive, and modern. It is not merely because some poems, like “Beatus Ille (Natural History)” or “Childhood Revisited (Corrales, Tumbes 1965)” are strongly anchored in Peruvian regional reality. Others are solidly grounded in American reality: the poet lives, teaches and writes in Montana; the American landscape, and New York and other American cities, towns and animals appear very specifically in his poetry. So do other places. Cities are named, whether it’s New Brunswick or Madrid. What makes the poems unusual today in our country, we think, is the kind of language and poetic mind that combine to produce them. In both Spanish and English, the language of the poems is simple in vocabulary and syntax: no quest for the exquisite adjective to show the poet’s sensitive appreciation of this or that (like love, or nature). And they are not written in regular meter; sometimes they’re in prose. Now, the style in Spanish is simple, the style in English is simple, too, and there are no formal metrical constraints, to say nothing of rhyme: doesn’t that mean it was
easy to translate? Anyone who has tried to take a simple—but melodious—poem from one language to another knows the answer to that question: it is a resounding NO. On the contrary, it’s one of the hardest things a translator can do. Above all, these “simple” poems come from a quirky, often funny, sometimes beautiful poetic imagination. This, too, is perfectly clear in the English version.

Perhaps the most striking trait of these poems is the quality which Guillaume Apollinaire identified many years ago (1917 to be exact, in “L’Esprit Nouveau et les Poètes”) as the essence of Modernism: surprise. Frank O’Hara said something like that too, decades later, in “Poetry,” in lines that could well be used to describe Chirinos’ poetry: “The only way to be quiet / is to be quick, so I scare / you clumsily, or surprise / you with a stab.” And indeed, unlike the language of many of the poets of his generation from South America, where poets felt they had to shout against the horrors of dictatorship, Chirinos is “quiet.” The surprise in his poems may be created by casting a fresh, original eye on the world, or by surprising turns of phrase (rendered quite exactly from the Spanish), by the unexpected attitude of the speaker, or by a myriad of other devices. Just a few examples:

The rats will die in the end because they can’t figure out the purpose of their species and are happy to play in the garbage like all creatures great and what have you.

— You aren’t ashamed to be like the rest. (9)

(In passing, we note that rats appear pretty often in these poems.)

[after a lovely evocation of Christmas in Bavaria and Peru:] I never liked Christmas. I must confess.

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I don’t know why I’m writing this poem.
— “Christmas in Bavaria.” (51)

(Apart from its surprise, the self-reflexive gesture at the end is also fairly typical of Chirinos.)

In my dream I dreamt I was killing my ex-wife and that, instead of burying her, I set fire to her underwear.

The smoke rose threateningly until it blacked out the sky and I understood that I was married to the night.

“Your first love is lost forever,” the angel sings, while I, bored, roll over to the other side of the bed.

— “The Cemetery.” (130-131)

I love her and she loves me: some day we’ll float like buoys in the Thames
— “Three Domestic Poems.” (48-9)

Even what seems like flat poetic realism is full of surprises in Chirinos. Thus the end of “River Rabbits” (73), a poem full of precise notation of animals in their natural habitat—as are many poems in this collection, particularly of rats, dogs, and other common animals, but here, rather odd “rabbits”:

It’s hard for the untrained eye to know they are rabbits.
They might just be scraps of garbage or round, brown rocks lapped by the river.

Sometimes, to these American readers, Chirinos seems to subscribe to William Carlos Williams’ famous
dictum “no ideas but in things,” but he has his own take on that, too. “Real” objects, whether in landscape or elsewhere, fuse into reflections on language and the poetic act. Here he’s adding to Williams’ great reflection on the “language” of the Paterson Falls:

Look,
there’s an old hydro station
and, in the river’s pool, all the garbage in the world.
This is the language of the water. It rushes forth
in blind pursuit of a distant ocean
and repeats nothing but the same words to us,
words we will never understand.
— “Paterson.” (74)

And realism is often mixed with vision, or with myth, as in “Lima Revisited” (53-54):

How deserted the streets are!
The gods have forsaken Antonio,
left him tightening his belt high and dry
in some lousy café. “Gimme a beer,” he says.
Soon suds will cover his mouth and bitterness
invade his blood. This is Lima, Antonio.
The gods have filled it with the dead.

The poet often alludes to gods and other mythical figures, and sometimes makes them speakers of the poem. G.J. Racz notes in his introduction that Chirinos began his career by using heteronyms: the first collection is called *The Notebooks of Horacio Morell* and it was followed by *Chronicles of a Man of Leisure* (in which we particularly enjoyed “The Dead Rocks.”) We would say, rather, “near-heteronyms”; the “Poem for Groucho, the One with the Mustache” in those *Notebooks*, for example, sounds as if it’s spoken by a Latin American poet (and why not Eduardo?) to “Comrade
Groucho,” and talks of the speaker’s cousin, who loathes anyone called Marx. At any rate, Racz points out that if Chirinos later abandoned the device, he has continued to lend his voice to many “historical, mythical, and literary figures” (xx). They range from Leon Trotsky and Maecenas’ cook to Ophelia, Cassandra and Teiresias. With mythical figures, if vocabulary and syntax remain simple, the tone rises to the occasion. Here are the opening and closing lines of “Dream of Sirens” (76), where the speaker is, presumably, Odysseus:

I, too, have shut my eyes
and endured the leather thongs that strapped me to
the mainmast
( . . .)
She covered the world with her eyes and erased me
with a glance.
Now I only wish to awaken.

Notice how, despite the simple vocabulary, the diction is more elevated here (“I, too…”), but there is always something precise and surprisingly unmythical in the language: she “erased me with a glance.” This is Chirinos, of course; but it is also Racz.

Salt Books is to be congratulated for publishing *Reasons for Writing Poetry* and for doing it well. The book is well-produced, sturdy, and good to look at; it has a nice feel to it, and you can buy it for $15 or less in the U.S. The anthology is not bilingual, which may disappoint some readers: but after all, you’re getting twice the number of poems for your money—and if you can really read poetry in Spanish, what do you need a translation for? A dictionary would suffice. The enticingly titled translator’s introduction (“‘No, the Sphinx Doesn’t Want an Answer’: The Poetics of Eduardo Chirinos”) usefully includes long quotations from Spanish-language critics which the English-language reader
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could never hope to see, much less understand, while three pages of notes at the end of the volume reference intertextual allusions and quotations in the poems which surely would have otherwise escaped us. For this, but above all for his translations, G.J. Racz deserves our gratitude, and our admiration.