

In hazard, translated

Diango Hernández. Düsseldorf, 27.10.2013.

“Coming out there into the blackness the blast hit him in the mouth, stopping his breath. He tried to gasp, but he could not: something pungent had filled his lungs, so that they retched and shuddered in the attempt to breathe. The wind was wrapping it round him in hot, greasy blasts. His unseeing eyes poured with water, smarted as in mustard gas. He must be in a cloud of dense smoke: but he could not see it, of course—the night could be no darker than it was anyhow. He had no idea where it came from: possibly the fiddley. The thing to do now was to find his way to the Bridge—if his lungs held out. Keeping his head with an effort of will, he began to feel his way along, holding his breath (what little breath he had), resisting the dangerous temptation to hurry.” (1)

During the afternoon of November 9, 1932 in the southeast of Cuba, a powerful short blast of wind violently snatched thousands of pieces of fruit from their trees; for more than five minutes, oranges, mangoes and papayas flew frenetically around like only scared birds know how. The next morning, the coastal village of Santa Cruz del Sur and its 3,000 inhabitants had vanished. During the previous night and in the space of a few minutes, the sea, with gigantic waves measuring five metres high in places, flooded miles of land. That same night and not faraway off the coast from Santa Cruz del Sur, the S.S. Phemius, under the command of Captain D.L.C Evans, was caught up for four days in the same category 5 hurricane that had erased the village of Santa Cruz del Sur. A couple of years later, Captain Evans asked Richard Hughes to write about these desperate four days. In 1938 Richard Hughes published *In Hazard*, a novel in which the protagonist was not the hurricane but the will of the survivor, the struggle of man against the gigantic fury of a cataclysm, human nature physiologically and physically naked in the face of inevitable and extreme circumstances.

“Only after he had published the book did Hughes himself comprehend its subtext: it is an anticipation of the physical upheaval of the second world war, but embodies also the virtues individuals would need to demonstrate if they were to survive the challenge presented by the war.” (2) It would seem as if cataclysms not only unchain devastating natural events, but also sequences of social catastrophes; as though the flying fruit of Santa Cruz del Sur on November 9, 1932 would fall years later as bombs all over Europe.

I was sitting, the piazza was crowded, between my hands I had a picture that I decided to look at without thinking, without saying anything to myself, I was just looking at it in silence allowing my eyes to rove over an image that was monumentally frozen. I wouldn't have wanted to see that image in motion; there are events that only happen to have been photographed as if sometimes in a photograph, even the sun and the wind have been hired to pose for the prism in front of the fatal eye of a photographer. There are also many photographs that depict a reality that hasn't had happened yet; they are a form of prediction, like the weather forecast showing us a satellite image which tells us that the hurricane is just five miles away.

But is it possible to photograph an event that hasn't happened yet? Is it possible that a person is alive without being born? I am leaving, I said to myself, and while I was getting up, I consciously dropped the photograph and without looking back, I left the piazza, knowing that once the photograph touched the grass, it would no longer be a photograph, but a piece of reality.

(1) Richard Hughes, *In Hazard* (New York, 2008). First published in 1938, by Chatto & Windus, London.

(2) Quote of Richard Poole; source: <http://www.richardpoole.net/criticism/richardhughes.aspx>

Richard Poole is a world authority on the work of Richard Hughes. His critical biography *Richard Hughes, Novelist* - was published by Poetry Wales Press in 1986, as was *Fiction as Truth: Selected Literary Writings by Richard Hughes* in 1983, which he edited.