

# English as a Second Language

Surrendering to nausea in the felt-lined Tijuana-bound camper  
I doubted the integrity of the breast-shaped nuclear reactors  
fixed on the Pacific shore, cherry-pink nipples upright and beaconing  
at a waltz tempo to the deepwater roughnecks swaying in their hemp  
hammocks below a network of oil lines spouting flames into the oceanic  
infinite dyed dead-eagle-god red and I shrinking in importance

like in my collegiate days when I nodded submissively to a professor  
who assured me my failure was because English was my second language  
which is true if second to the cosmic mutterings of black holes  
which is true nights I bellow desert monsoons into extinction  
which is true when my hands are held up bearing the Atlantean  
burden of brownness but which is most true here, surrendering

to nausea in the felt-lined Tijuana-bound camper  
piloted by my dark-skinned father whom I've only ever understood in dialect  
amalgamated from epazote and McDonald's fries gathered  
between the San Gabriel Mountains and Popocatepetl  
who continues his delicate lament of ash even when exposed  
by the melting glaciers that once kept his mourning summit numb

I whisper to the Exxon™ Mobil gas station that I too can love  
enough to become a volcano and reach out so that my palm  
skates atop a gust of sea breeze and the invisible exhaust  
of topless convertibles, blond hair pouring upward  
from their front seats and strangling the open air uninhibited

and drunken with the riches of the west, the tall straw rippling  
on the hillside in unison, the mega-outlet with its 24-hour security  
desk illuminating the alleyways of the bad neighborhood  
and the hordes of day laborers spilling out into the avenues  
climbing atop trucks unsolicited, sharp-eyed and hungry  
now I will say it, blessed be the Virgin Mary

that I've kept this close to the southern frontier  
this close to the police beat and the ticking tear-gas canisters,  
this close to the unidentifiable pots of spices roiling in the night markets  
I reach to Gloria Anzaldúa and read *Borderlands*  
till I lose sight of the swallows' nests that stipple the cliffsides  
and drift onto the Harbor Freeway where in March 2006  
the children of the frontier were in multitudes curdling traffic  
a thousand strong as I sat sugar-buzzed and unobstructive in homeroom

and now my head rolls forward and I startle awake  
the idle nuclear reactors pulsing longingly in the rearview mirror  
the oil-rig plume billowing tenderly in response, our roughnecks'  
night sweat cooled by the prospect of tomorrow's new depths  
it baited as progress as self-preservation that will not include me  
or my pilot or maybe even you, but whoever has and still sits  
in the enormous leather chair.

# The Last Town Before the Mojave

Hunker down, Heyzeuz, if that's your real name,  
and look closely; do you remember us?

Gutter-born barrio, quiet patch of silt  
populated by your benevolent

Río Bravo, her river roots cuddling  
up near Coke caps and shredded beef dripping  
from corn crushed flat. My advanced chemistry  
lab partner wandered home last night howling,  
*Brother had nowhere to go but come back.*

His jarhead still cut high and tight when he  
hit the dirt, crushed glass and olive leaves rimmed  
his wounds like a rotten margarita.

His body lit by the other shrine's glow,  
Oh, how the San Gabriels still burn and snow.

Oh, how the San Gabriels still burn and snow!  
Ash powdering the community pool  
as Danny Trejo, our Patron Saint of  
Pacoima, glares from his mural painted  
on the east side of the tortería  
on Van Nuys Blvd. My chulas with  
their inch-thick eyeliner loiter beneath  
and lament like mourning calaveras:  
O Cempaxochitl! O Cempaxochitl!  
Their thousand-spoked gold crowns blistering in  
unison to the muffler two-step of  
lowriders funeral marching to an  
oldies dirge. Hot pistons popping skyward  
to say, *You—keep your faith, all is fire.*

To say, *You—keep your faith, all is fire*  
is to remember the horse's bruised knee,  
the paved-over trails and the coyote  
wearing the soda cup like a muzzle.  
The brush fire smoked out all the burrows  
and razed the thicket of jacarandas,  
exposing the bent ribs of waterways  
entrenched deep ages ago. My brother  
lost his way home in our own desert,  
dehydrated deer eye hanging from his  
wrist for mal ojo. I am no longer  
surprised when we stumble upon the graves:  
the crack of smoldering trunk, numinous  
wails, and then the silence of devotion.