Her Back, My Bridge

She sat blush-cheeked, straight-backed & beautiful, thin-waisted & tearless at the window when she first came. A crumbling brick sill beneath small elbows. Brown eyes glisten, wish to receive dresses, jewels from American GI's. The street below smelling of dead things, outhouses. Her flowered red-green dress, panty hose rolled over bony knees. As a girl she could dance; she'd scrub poverty with Ajax to find peace. She stuffed her cheeks with Mexican food—Las Tinas, big vats of pintos, rice. Riding the Santa Fe boxcars to pick onions in fields. Thirteen siblings screaming, sleeping. She was broken early by a boy. Found herself on red knees, taken in an alley. And the tears, did they come? Her eyes forever worried by the sun. Has she seen trees sway wind, were clouds and sky ever blue-green? Could she kill that boy, now a man, with a cast-iron pan? Chihuahita's buildings red and gray beneath the loneliest polluted sun. She's too old to clean now. The state's lady comes twice a week to scrub her frail back. They won't scratch her back hard enough, won't dance her age away. She's pissed. Wrestling's her favorite thing, Picale, Picale, she screams poking the screen with a pencil. Her shoes once rubbed ankles raw, yet she's sway and swing, her voice a dove's call—Jesus, Jesus. She told me one spring of the dove's hopeful mourning in the fields. She's breathing thin now, her veins too thick, her bones hollow, her left eye glaucoma-silver. A bedroom mirror covered with pictures, my own ten-year old American face rosy and cheered. She tells me, "I'm ready to die." Her favorite song, "La Puerta Negra." The Black Door.
"You've got to be strong in this life—mijita." Here I am singing the unsung positive capability of the desert, how weeds grow orange wildflowers.

**Slow Dancing with Frank Pérez**

I called him fish-lips, Frank was all bones, dark. His knees sunk in at the sides. You could mistake him for a runner. When he kissed me, he barely opened his mouth. The tip of his tongue peeped into my mouth, two fish sucking rubbery lips. Fumbling and leaping like salmon into a glorious world, its incalculable madness and beauty still fresh. Our breastless, peckless hurried sway. My arches ached from moving tip-toed. Our oafish knees and the lyrics hummed in meaningless pulses and tones. I remember the floor moving, the ceiling afame in colors. Each pain, each trope blooms now to real meaning. Frank never made it to twenty. He died in a parachute accident, a broken young body. I still see his black curls, eyes two pits of dark innocence. And life is like this, hurried and awkward; the way pride swells and need takes over, all weary desire. The way those lost speak through an old song that lives duende or heart and steam, knows what it means to touch. Smooth songs sting something more than sexy, each word swells to images, implodes in icons. Memory does this, helps us live through all the cutting borders, the aches of our slow return to bumbling knees and bony hips.

**Learning to Speak**

I forgot how to speak. The old man with a gray beard eyed me, waiting for Spanish.

Years of English rumbled something absent, forgotten. The Tigua Indian Village, men at the corner bench eating tamales. Indoors, tables with white Formica, floor-tiles peeling. In the steam of cilantro and tomato children sit cross-legged and sip caldo de res. Men smoke afterward in faded jeans and t-shirts lightly rise around their pecs in the wind. It is how home is all that's left in the end. The way we all return forever exiled. History in mud houses and shady river-trees. Canal water drifts. Children poke crawdads with dry branches. I spoke Spanish broken, tongue-heavy. I was once too proud to speak Spanish in the barrio. He waits for my voice. His eyes generations. My brown skin a scandal on the hard streets of El Paso. But, everyone loves a resurrection. Mauricio on a red motor bike; Bob, a green-eyed white war hero, spits tobacco. The sunlit desert and its gold light falling upon us. *Quiero aprender español*, I whisper. He smiles. Blue hills in the distance sharpen in an old elegance; the wind hushes itself after howling the silences.
Two Girls from Juarez

Two girls from Juarez hesitantly step toward my desk. "Ms.," one says with a paperback of Plath's Ariel corners folded and coffee stained. "Was she white or black?" One with over-dyed red hair and black roots announces, "She was prejudiced!"

I am now questioning my life in a desert; questioning as lightning rips the sky like an instant of daylight in the hard black lake of night. In Plath's "Daddy" a black man bites a woman's heart, and all the wit and the wordplay between darkness and light shrugs.

I am bitten. The girls want to know about Plath's gasps, about her white eyes in darkness. One wears an electronic bracelet around her ankle. The other's cheeks red with too much rouge.

I imagine they live nights dangerously in an Oldsmobile near the Rio Grande, that they love for real and they love to love.

I smile at them with no answer. I lost answers long ago and the faces of my colleagues grew ghost-like and words fell away and the poetry cancer came like a priest for the sacrifice.

Poesía de Maquiladora

I am swept into a sadness, still and unspeakable in sterile rooms where men might as well wear white coats and drink my breath from stethoscopes.

They were so happy to show us the habits of locusts, drain blood into plastic bags of their manufacturing. Tell us, Latina, was it what they assumed it was, broken language, poetry of a lesser nature, a wound?

The way my brown knees slammed hard in the fall from what was left of grace.

My eyes shrunk to slits, my only salvation came in the flight of grackles, the way the moon swelled, striped with red-orange light.

It has rained more this spring. I am sick of having to watch what I say. The grackles have beaten the songs down with their desperate caws. The tree branches scream, too, now.

The most intelligent doctors walk through their patients. Assume a sickness. My mind has pleated itself in a veil of shadows. My body is fading back to an invisible border.
Pity the Drowned Horses

It is one of those nights when you fall back into childhood like the breeze gentle against your half-quiet ears.

The tall Italian cypress still giant to your small eyes, the moon lopsided—still, holy, mysterious.

The clothesline droops now and the height of the line, once a Herculean reach, is only an arm’s length away.

Your feet easily plant themselves on the ground and no longer gleefully dangle while arms stretch sinewy & young.

The stars hum still & blessed. You carry the cracked hose to water the drying tree, & the dead grass sings a silent hymn, the water’s dribble makes you want to cry, not because the pipes are dry like your grandmother’s bones, but because the sky is still, yet moves like the night you turned seven. Here, the dry garden hose brings tears to your eyes, and you weep your insignificance. The dead neighbor’s white Chevy truck parked in the same spot for years is gargantuan, yet invisible.

Mr. Tellez, try to remember his round face, his broad back in a white t-shirt watering the pink and white oleanders.

Were they imagined? Was his face so unimportant? The truck looms undisturbed and heavy. The highway buzzes where desert once sat calmly. Cars replaced screaming children, bicycles and the holy ritual of running through the sands native, dark thighs sweating in what seemed an eternal sun.

And what do we care for the smallness of another? It’s our own shame, the way palms clench or eyes dart fearfully, the way we learn gossip in shadow, talk ourselves into believing god is listening because we are afraid, the shadow on your pale cheek is darkened like the blue lake of night. All you can do is eye the slow gilded stars, the black lake of sky, memory above the forty-foot trees through a broken branch. The moon waltzes with the veil of night clouds and finally water gushes and the tree’s roots drink the last waters, the first waters, holy waters brought down from sky, and you still may think of Moses and mist like you did when you were twelve, and may still imagine god’s waters crashing down on the heads of your enemies, yet pity the drowned horses.

An Atheist Learns to Pray

Maybe you found the moon sun-lit in black space or gazed at Saturn’s blue-red-gold prism. Slow warmth in an empty universe, light became your daily bread, night a starry sacrifice. The way darkness paints and blots havoc. We always return to beauty after the abyss, bruised and cold, learning that a rose open to May is unburdened. Why not swing our hips and sway as leaves chime to dawn. One learns from children, a dog’s thick ribbed breath, the rise and fall of night. Even when slandered, one drinks water and the sky. Blessed be the way caught among showers, the sun later rising like a man listening to god.
The Colt

The sky glowed its red burning, and the damp air smelled of mulch, and the earth called itself up inside of me like a smoggy song.

The colt's belly round like a donkey's.
Wet and frizzled brown hair trotting

behind a brown-white spotted mare,
proud in its tall-legged towering.

Thin-ribbed dogs running through traffic.

We call far into the distances between us.
Wind brushes my cheek in a cold need.

All things, drawn to one
another like the flippant tail of a colt
in a barren field where the flat bed
of an eighteen wheeler rusts and the tractor rests upon its fat tires, and the black eyes

of birds, the wings of crows flutter
with a deep-throated call of hunger, want
like a cool shadow over the broken neighborhood. Chickens like the fretted hard strums of electric guitars run wired

through the yard, squawking then beating the sky.

And there stood a child like an old god,
running, nipping at the larger horses' legs,
wild with the birthing, fresh before the earth, the wind nothing but its very breath.