Empty Spaces

She is a switchblade afraid of the hint in a two second glint that might spring you an arm's length away. I fear. She kisses close, to shut the open gate of hunger, heavy-footed as history perched on her chest. Empty spaces. She never rests. Stumbling through the clutter of language, she rummages cramped closets for her lost sounds—igriegas y erres—tumbling like marbles spilled in the attic. Spaces I fear. She mainlines white noise—a guest persistent as rain flooding her muted room. Spaces. She adds another hue to the walls crawling with orange and blue that zigzag the curves of her world to the ceiling. I fear empty spaces. She is reeling in a ravenous subjunctive that would doubt its own bones were it not for her grip slipping from your moist shoulders to the winter of metal bedposts. Spaces I empty. She grinds against you, minding only the bland blue sky that filters through the O'Keeffe hollow of her pelvis. I empty fear. In this abyss, she comes, braying the silence away.

Report from the Temple of Confessions in Old Chicano English

(after an installation by Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes)

Se cruzan canyons en el templo de confesiones. Language lies across the barbed lines. piles of its limbs pierced y pinchados. Risky recordings reveal what we think of the Other offering his objectified body to the river rats who ride his wetback. the coro de coyotes who crave his flesh, the whey-faced who whisper their sin in his ear, the translators who trap and trade his tongue. la raza who receive him. la raza who repel him.

In this chamber the chill of chicken flesh— pollito mojado picoso y picado. the black body bag of the repatriated. Here the distorted words of debutants y do-gooders, of know-no-bettors y neo-Nazis, of Beowulf and other born-again beasts,
Hey honey, I can fly
through Ginsberg's naked streets at dawn.
Coyote, he don't quite get it,
applies queer theory to his reading
of Burroughs riding freight train.
In a post-structuralist world
you ride on top of the axles
underneath either end of a boxcar
and watch the sparks fly!
Don't get a cinder in your eye.
That's the cyberpunk way to get
your mojado butt from the frontera
to the fields or the service sweatshops.
Only if coyote don't find you first,
and if he does, he'll eat you alive,
crunch you down like chicharron
because he don't want no
vegan dietary restrictions;
no one gonna lay that trip on him.
He'd rather gorge himself on your sweet meat
until he auto-destructs,
blows himself to bits
all up and down the Rio Grande.
And in the time it takes you to find
his plastic voodoo in your Lucky Charms,
he'll be warming a stool in
the cantina at the next border town.
How's that for signification theory?

from Sound Waves: A Series

The river on the other side
of English is carrying the message
—Victor Hernández Cruz

'Tono—D'

Some days cushion the dental edges
of our lives like night's cool curve.
swerving into the music of light
dándonos the soft shoulder de voz.

Danilo y Diana sweep the street
of its blossoms, dejan piles
of magenta petals lining the gutters
de la colonia. Sí, hay basura,
un cigarillo aquí, una lata allá,
but we are blinded by hyacinth
suns bursting from the pavement.

When dusk sinks into la plaza
destrayendo our braided days,
one hundred black wings
sing in the ceiling of leaves
above Gabo’s favorite cafe,
the curl of carru carru carru
floating like a feather to his chair.

This day es una danza de dedos
pressing half moons into clay,
the consonant touch of tongue
to teeth arching the sound away.

Duración—V

Aquí vuelan aves arracimadas como neos
Clusters perch over
open-mouthed stones,
the sculpted men arcing back,
necks straining toward gods and vines,
elbows raised in angles.
Birds veil the starved sun.

Aquí vuelan aves arracimadas
This is the V in Cabeza de Vaca
sweating the salt of the bay
in a migration that halts and hovers.
Is it the glint of obsidian that lures
vultures to the eye of earth?
Or jade of stone beasts that pull

thieves up the open-legged vertices
of our pyramids? We vanish

Aquí vuelan aves
in the wind-worn skull of the longhorn,
in mutations making bowls
of eye sockets, cups of its keratin.
We carve hilts for our bowies
from the open jaw. We feed.
Muscle is a buzzard’s feast,
our brazos his power to sway.

Aquí
The new sounds echo
a chamber older than memory.
Our e’s fling their arms open
and come back to us. B’s.
We have seen balas
faster than veins of light
etching the night sky.

They fill our heads with ringing.

Medicine
(after a print by Jeff Abbey Maldonado)

Lacandona, the rain forest,
is a woman draped in solitude.
her hair a translucent cocoon.
In her lungs, a clearing
where stone pillars
hold arches of sky.
As tangled roots and loneliness
fill her tilted womb.
she turns her back on waiting.
Her dark shoulder passes
through temple walls
to the internal refuge

where she shapes masks
of creatures she imagines

spawning from her,
hatching from the splintered
shells of eggs
too thin to incubate.

There is a man under the tent
of her eyebrow,
an old ghost
in the slit of her stare.

There is a rustling
beneath her skin.

Axolotl, the lizard, slips
like green corn into her mouth,

clicks his toenails
against her teeth,

nestles in the harvest
under her tongue,

twists down
the stalk of her spine.

She searches for his tails
lost in her limbs,
cought on the branches of her ribs,

is the medicine to clear

the red clouds from her eyes,
draw the poison

from her punctured flesh
before it swims

into the seventh generation.

Sometimes, dusk soothes

er slashed back, cools its burns,
peels away the day’s pain.

And if we turn

in the evening mist,

we can hear her
whisper our names.

Our Language

When I sigh
I am breathing you
back out of me.

Like smoke you pause,
then melt into air.

You are often this intangible,
the silent e of love
or hache of habito.

Hablaue, you say,
yet my next breath
draws you in with the air
hissing past teeth
because I do not know
where I want you
or what awkward syntax
I’ll leave twisted
in the whispering sheets.

The hush of your hands
reaches me from every shadow.

You kiss the slats of skin open
to the striped dawn
of the window blind.

You kiss these warm t’s
of light and depart.
In the caesura between hours and days,
weeks, I stroke watercolors.
The blue sinks deep
as the resonant pitch
of your vocal chords,
an anaphora of waves
lapping to the shore
until the paper is satiated.
I am not.

We work in English,
make love in Spanish,
and code-switch past our indecision.
On days filled with your absence,
I think in sinoletas
and trace you in the ring left
by my morning coffee cup.
If only I could touch
the amber circles of your eyes,
kiss your liquid pupils
when they dilate, enticed.
Then I'd be inside of you
as you so easily
fall into me.

I'd feel the constriction
of an x we cannot name,
the multilingual moan of o's,
tense Spanish vowels
awaiting release.
Then the loose
swirling of an erre
down our spines,
down the soft sides of our arms,
liquidas vibrantes
of our blood.
This is how I want you—
at once within
and without

like a breath,
a sigh,
a language.

Song

You shout my name
from beyond my dreams,
beyond the picture window
of this Rosarito beach house.
Rushing from bed to shore
I glimpse their backs—
volcanoes rising out of the sea.
Your back, a blue-black silhouette,
feet wet with the wash of morning waves.
Fountains spring from mammal minds.
your hands lifting a splash of sand.
I'm on my knees,
toes finding a cool prayer
beneath them, fingers pressing
sea foam to my temples,
while you open arms wide as a generation,
raise them to a compass point,
dive.
If you could reach them,
you would ride their fins
under the horizon,
then surf the crash of waves
left in their wake.
And if I could grasp
my own fear,
I'd drown it,
leave it breathless and blue
as this ocean,
as the brilliant backs
of whales
surfacing
for air.