

THE RAILROAD IN THE SKIES

Violeta Orozco

Trapped inside the lines of the map
hanging off a cliff in the Atlantic coast
a hostage in the cockpit

I watched as the plane rode overhead
pointing its nozzle toward the south
passing over the miles like a slot machine

going over the numbers
as they all watched from the stadium, cheering
in unison as my Mexican body

was carried over the oceans
like los vuelos de la muerte
surveying the country below

like a heavy bomber
ambushing the blind, silent land
circling the skies like an impatient vulture

about to drop its cargo
or suddenly swoop down
triggered by a moving target

a Mexican running through the desert
of Arizona or Sonora, his gaze
 piercing the bushes to find a den

where to hide
like the underground system in Vietnam
 the bodies finding their way

through the maze with their eyes closed
their feet recognizing the width of each crack
 sensing the microscopic alterations of the land

each and every rock and flower
shifting beneath his weight to let him pass
 the exhausted migrant dropping to the ground bathed in sweat

the water leaking from his body
like premature blood
 instantly lapped up by the hot sands

greedily
dehydration slowly altering
 the geographies of the skin

dust and dusk settling upon the back
of a cooling body.

I have been here before
gazing down at these brambles

like a parachutist preparing his landing,
an unlikely canopy

for a somersault artist
caught
between land and water

swirling through the air
like a bold stuntman

Where am I gonna fall
this time?

Who am I going to fall back upon?
I look down at the bare mountains

realize they are waiting for me
in the desert on the border,

this is where I get off.
This is where the plane halts

three blocks away
from the country that pushed me away from its womb.

Here is where it all ends.
Here is where it all starts

I get off, shaken, like the Schrodinger cat
neither dead nor alive

I guess I know the answer now
I was condemned to live
 I was condemned to live

OUTSIDE THE TURTLE'S SHELL

Violeta Orozco

I write this for you today,
knowing wherever end or originate

we will return
beyond our broken sense of self

all of us are looking beyond ourselves
gathering our shards

sweeping the floors with our bodies,
our skins full of holes bleed.

We will return to what we call home
even if it is not home

we will call it home
because this shell carries us across the oceans
this raft carries far
beyond the earth

we recede into the open ocean
gathering our amphibian strength.

*La tortuga se guarda
hasta que se acaba la tormenta.*

Allá afuera aguarda
the ocean of pain.

You dive deep inside yourself
and you surface gathering the pebbles
upon the uneven shore.

SHIPWRECK ON THE SHORES OF THE POTOMAC

Violeta Orozco

I dedicate this poem to all those
who write by candlelight
to all those that beat the odds
that beat the shape out of them
distort their words, the way
they spoke to themselves at midnight
praying against the darkness
that threatened to swallow
what was left of them now
that they had left their countries
bruised like wives beaten by husbands
by candlelight

To all those who had to choose between
beef and beer with a 6 grand annual stipend
after tuition and taxes, the full ride
that had granted them access
into the bounteous land of unlimited exploitation,
the salary that meant the difference
between having a roof over their books
and their crowded dreams interrupted
by the screaming of children in the same room
parents who came banging the door in the morning

to ask for help with the house on your long
four-month forced vacation
because you couldn't pay the rent
from May to August and had your body
shipped back to your native country
your books locked up on rented locker space
until the time bomb of stored money burst
and you had to scramble for your possessions,
trying to staunch the wound
stop the hurricane from dispersing
the only luggage
you had managed to salvage from the hurricane.

Every night you had the same recurring nightmare
you were toppled overboard
by the same ship
clawed at the water trying to find the anchor
or a ladder to help you climb back
into the boat where you were only
—a stowaway—an illegal member of the crew
slinking her way into the main deck
past the white
guards playing black and red
cards
seated on brown
leather chairs imported from Mexico
or Morocco, always in disguise
You managed to hide for five years

in the cellar next to the wine
barrels and the food storage
You had come from a long line
of underground workers
that had adapted over generations
to unlit basements and rotting cellars
This cupboard was after all
the room of your own
you had managed to find
in the middle of the ocean
and you were thankful for each day
your body could survive untouched
by the maelstrom –miraculous as it seemed–
crouched in the small space you claimed
writing
by candlelight.

