

the ice worker sings

it didn't matter to him that it was only seasonal
or that he had no choice but the graveyard shift;
a job in the ice plant in the hot fresno summer
was as close as he'd get to heaven.
or at least, this is what he thought.

he liked this job cause they let him alone.
here, everyone wore ear plugs
and he was left in a room
by himself to stack blocks
of ice into rows of crystal perfection,
rows and rows, a huge army
of petrified water standing at attention.
he found himself marching back and forth
singing songs he never knew he loved.
sometimes he would sing rock
or blues or even a classical tune
he'd heard on a bad radio commercial.
but, mostly, he would steal the beats
and put in his own words about life,
about love, about dying.
this is how he became a poet
parting ways with the sad ocean
of ordinary speech. he sang loud
and he liked it. no one ever told him
to shut up, or that he couldn't carry a tune.
he enjoyed seeing song
spring from between his lips
in the white breath of the cold room.

he found he could forget everything
while he sang among the ice:
the house that kept shedding shingles,
the mad dogging eyes that followed him
to work, and his cowardice under the yellow street lamps

while he knelt on the road of potholes and gravel and dust
begging the moon to release him from his fear of everything.
but here he sang, and his army of ice
to him were warriors from tula, big
square warriors, sympathetic to the orders
of their general, which, of course, was him.
they laughed when he laughed
and cried when he cried.
only here, he never cried.
he didn't have to.

at home, his mother slept with the windows open
in hope a breeze would finally blow.
at home, they didn't have refrigeration.
at home, even the walls were hot.
on breaks he would sit outside
on the bench to smoke and drink coffee.
here he would pray for his mother,
pray for angels to come carrying machine-
guns and flamethrowers
to keep watch over her.
he would pray for wind
so that she, like him, might escape
the hell of fresno in the summer.

and when the break was over
he would go back to the ice
and give life to his army,
he would go back to the ice
and sing.

in search of aztlán

*i came looking for aztlán
but couldn't find it
it had been hidden with names
like fresno parlier earlimart*

*i came asking questions of my family
but my family could only remember
how the last paycheck
was swallowed mysteriously
by the valley's hot air*

letter to sarah

the wind comes claiming again
its right of way through the valley

and i'm sitting in the field of vines
where as a child i chased wasps.

my large nostrils are full of dust
and the smell of ripe grapes.

i am explaining you to the peach moon
that hangs there low and listening,

but my mouth merely hangs open
and i find i don't know enough

to explain anything. i have only
a memory resting in my gut like

a tear already fallen from the face.

the rains have left and ernesto is dead

for trejo

the rains have left
and the air is hot this day.
in between
the rows of vines
sparrows are feeding
on a dog and his worms.

there is no breeze
to rustle the grape leaves
or to cool the dry
pocked faces of prostitutes
around the villa motel.
there is only this season
and this night
to breed anger
in the empty stomachs of children.

a car passes on the road in front of my porch
and whips dust in swirls and again
the smell of sulfur
catches my nose by surprise.
so long, it seems, i've been
in this valley off the 99,
watching the children play in this dust,
watching mothers cry out
to God for justice for peace for death,
watching the honda civics passing by, passing through,
never stopping on this side, this scary side violent side,
this side of misspent anger.

yes, it's warm
and swamp coolers only
make me sweat more. from my porch

i can see three campesinos walking
into town, covered in dust, and i wonder
if their children will be deformed,
or maybe they will die soon,
leaving the fields to no one
but the farmers.
the sparrows have been frightened
from the dog by the three,
but they will return
to pick from his flesh
what they can.

luciana: this is how i see you

how will i remember you, grandma?
will it be your name, luciana, that i recall
on nights when the forgetful remember
everything?

luciana: beautiful
like the wind winding whispers
through the arms of the trees.

luciana: my sister carries your name
and she wears your earrings
and her birth will forever carry
your heart

beating boldly for the truth.

how will i remember you, abuelita?
will it be in the kitchen
tortillas on the comal
eggs frying in the pan
and a song of praise
pouring forth from your lips?

or perhaps
it will be your face, a bruised petal of forgiveness
as you told me your story
on a saturday afternoon
in dixon,
how grandpa came for you
smelling of sheep and whores, how your
grandmother
was old and tired and begging for the cool sheet of a warm bed
to lie down and forget her life, how she sold you or traded you
dragging you away from the dolls
to stand before the priest
and become a woman at
twelve.

or maybe
i will remember you
hobbling into the grocery store,

the nylons gathering at the back of your knees
like wrinkled skin,
like survival.

will i remember your hands, your beautiful hands,
two measures of tender masa
you use to lay on the faces of all your children?
will i remember your prayers prayed,
the powerful breath of your hope
forging a way for us all in this madness?

i tell you grandma, this is how i see you:
you are dancing, your straight leg is bending and your hair
is waving wild
as beautiful laughter like song strums from your mouth into the sky,
and your eyes, your eyes are catching the shine of the Son,
like two huge apples begging notice on the tree, and you are shouting
with your smile, "hallelujah! hallelujah!" and all the angels
are dancing and
laughing with you, and Jesus is saying, "i love you so much, mija."
and you are saying, "mi amor, mi amor," like a beautiful sigh.

star struck

*sometimes these walls ask me,
"were you never happy, love boy?"*

i would step out
into the night
into the alley
where the ants
savored the crushed
anguish of a peach

and the road was nothing
but dirt with worn tracks
of tires, two arms reaching
to the place i had always wanted
to go, but never knew how to get to.
the night, to me, always
smelled sweet with grapes
and stung the back of my nose
with ditch-water breath and dust.

from my house at the edge of town
across from the high school football field
across from the dying field of vines, i walked
into the darkness. it was here
that i learned to love
as the sky opened
like a huge howl of lights
and the sounds of frogs
and crickets and birds baptized
my ears into hearing.

i would walk through the rows
of fruit, my feet always hesitating,

content with the despair
of the dying city of progress,
my feet sinking into dirt clods
and sand seeping into my shoes,
into my socks, as if in conspiracy
with the potholes of my street
or with the cracked walls of my room.

but my heart dragged us on
to the bank of the ditch
that oversaw the drowning
of an old dining room chair,
where the rim of a wheel
juttet defiantly out
from the wall of mud and stone,
and the abandoned trash
of grape wood and kitchen bags
became homes to blue-bellied lizards
and widows.

there i would sit
pulling tobacco from my pocket,
putting pinches of sweet leaf
into my mouth, watering,
and i would lay back in the weeds
while the water rolled by,
my feet caressing the cool kiss
of the ditch. and there i would breathe,
really breathe deep,
as if sucking the stars
into my chest, as if i was taking
life forever into my soul.

there i would sit
and sometimes weep,
not because i was a boy
so alone, but because

in the blue-black bruise
of my life, in the middle
of steel and fruit ready to rot,
i could find the cold love
of earth beneath my back
and God smiling,
making promises
from the sky.