

Our Breath On The Mirror

by Ed Frankel

Under the Dodgers' cap, and khaki work shirt
the woman selling flowers by the freeway
is short, broad and full as the Goddess
of earth and death, Coatlicue, and you hear
the rattles on her ankles, her necklace
of hands, and skulls shaking
to the heart of a distant smoking drum.
The two snake heads rattle in her hands
as Coatlicue begins to dance.

With a lift of her chin Juana raises her eyebrows
offering the flowers--Guelagetza—
to faces behind the glass that look at her,
pretend not to look at her.
Windows hum open or slide closed.
Sometimes men rush and fumble for dollar bills
as they watch the light, then lay the rose
beside them on the passenger seat.

Juana relieves herself at the Arco station
or in the bushes by the side of the freeway.
She is two thousand miles from Tlacolula.
She and her brother each paid the coyote
two thousand dollars American to guide them
through the labyrinths of arroyos and barrancas
past la Migra, in their blazers with their nightscopes,
across the border, that jagged scar, al otro lado.

She wires a hundred and fifty a month
to her mother who pays the bills,
who makes a payment on the land in Mitla,
who saves the rest for three years to send other children
to hide under the remote pitch of the moon
from the green and infrared lights that search
for silhouettes of caravans and the dreams of caravans,
the heat of human bodies, on a backlit horizon.
They will walk with care past the listening machines
that hear their pulses surge and their mouths go dry.
They remember Eliseo, Macario, and Evodio from the village
who froze to death last year in these mountains
just three miles from the highway.

You would like to believe that the Virgin of Guadalupe
 covered them with her shawl, that the Naguals
 came to them in their sleep
 and told them that the storm would pass,
 brought them posole and steaming champurrado.
 You would like to believe that their tears froze like pearls,
 that they died in a fairy tale
 like the ice princess or Grimm's little match girl.
 Perhaps freezing to death is like falling asleep.
 Huddle together, M'ijos, six hands,
 six arms and legs, entwined,
 three hearts, thick, and slow, and beating.

What are you dreaming Juana, out there by the freeway?
 Are you rocking in a hammock years from now
 in your own jalapa in Mitla?
 You braid flowers and colored ribbons
 into your granddaughter's hair for *The Day of the Dead*
 The smell of the cempasuchil, the marigolds
 and the smoking copal, remind you of roses and oranges,
 the gray faces of the gavachos in their shiny cars
 stony and silent as the hieroglyphs of the old ones
 in Monte Alban and Tule.

The Camazotz call your name Juana,
 from their dream gardens and the church bells ring in
 the cold winds of the north that bring the spirits of the dead.
 Your mother and father are coming across the River Chiconaupan
 the day after tomorrow, El Dia de Los Muertos.
 They will need gifts and travelers' provisions.
 Lay the path of orange marigolds from the door to the altar.
 Scatter breadcrumbs and flower seeds for the birds
 which are the souls of small children.
 The altar is perfect-- gladiolas, chrysanthemums.
 Stalks of corn, bamboo and sugarcane arch across time
 and the cycles of the souls' resurrections.
 Don't forget-- Abuela liked Chapulines, fried grasshoppers,
 and Abuelo Joselito liked his mescal.
 Leave them a glass of water.
 They have journeyed far and they are thirsty.
 Candles, yes, lots of candles to light their way.
 Go to the Cemetery and clear the weeds.
 See that the graves are swept clean.

Put the sugar skulls, with their maraschino eyes
 and syrupy smiles next to the old pictures:
 Gran Tio Chuy, fuerte y formal
 as he stares into the camera.
 The Angelitos, the dead little children lie posed
 in their parents arms: Refugia, at two years old
 on Tia Cecilia's lap in a white dress
 holds a cross to the camera in her cold, tiny hands.
 Arrange their favorite foods, the seven moles,
 home-made mescal and candied pumpkin,
 fresh baked "bread of the dead."
 The altar is perfect.
 Nothing must be touched by anyone.
 The children will return on November 1,
 the adults the day after.
 They cannot eat but will kiss the food,
 take in the aromas and moisture of the preparations.
 When they are satisfied they will look for you
 to leave behind their good will and their blessings.

And the gavachos will come as well,
 two thousand miles from el otro lado, how strange
 with all their gear and their money, rushing,
 taking pictures, que raro.
 When they smile they seem sad and hungry.
 Remember when one-- sin verguenza, shameless,
 even wanted to buy the shawl you were wrapped in,
 and the blanket you were sitting on at the cemetery.

The tour buses and the shiny rented cars rumble
 out of the dusty night into Tlascalula.
 Gavachos with video cameras at the windows
 film *The Day Of The Dead*.
 When you look at them, the flesh melts off their bones.
 Allegados, son iguales.
 Having arrived, they are all equal,
 like the figures in Posada's drawings,
 Skeletons in shorts, with cameras around their necks,
 take pictures of each other.

Donde esta la bathroom?
 Skeletons bargaining for rugs and black pottery.
Ask her if the dyes are natural or artificial.

skeleton children, loud and unmannered
 maniosos y malcriados, grabby and badly behaved,
 skeletons full of coming and going
 taking with them little pieces of your village
 to put on their walls and mantles.

Lights explode beside the people at the graves,
 The red eyes of the cameras glow
 like the eyes of the Camazotz in the night
 who come to steal people's dreams.
 The skeletons covet it all, the sugar sweet holidays,
 the rituals, they look south of the border,
 to have maraschino cherries for eyes,
 necklaces of marigolds and syrupy smiles,
 to have their souls become bread of the dead
 for the Gods to feast on.
 But their pleasures last as long as the marzipan skull
 that melts on the tongue and is gone.

Do not mind them Juana.
 They desire what the dollars cannot buy,
 not the charms or the pictures of the Virgen
 to put on their walls or their refrigerators.
 They also want to stop the rush of time.
 We are all skeletons in a Posada drawing
 all on our way, coming and going to Bone Town.
 We all borrow, hunt and gather, and dance to faraway drums,
 whiten our faces with rice powder as we try
 to commemorate ourselves and those we love,
 to see our breath on the mirror.

Guelagetza: a Zapotec offering, a gift to share or reciprocate.

La Migra: US Immigration Service.

Al otro lado: to the other side.

M'ijos: Mi hijos, i.e. my children

Naguals: Mythical Mexican Trickster animals

Champurrado: hot drink made of corn and chocolate.

Jalapa: open air palm roofed house.

Copal: incense made of resin.

Camazotz: Olmec diety associated with night, death, and sacrifice

See that their graves are kept clean: a blues line. From Blind Lemon Jefferson?

Posada: Mexican artist/cartoonist and satirist famous for popularizing the Calaveras, depictions of the skeletons of Day of the Dead

Sin Verguenza: shameless one

Breath on the mirror: Popol Vuh

Ofrenda: offering