

you are standing with her on a gliding electric platform, and above is Our Lady of Guadalupe, the blue mantel, the gold frame, the real image and not all the replicas and reproductions that you have forever seen. As your eyes lock on it, you are choking up in some unexplainable way, maybe from the shock of this unexpected experience, and you have coasted to the other end, and so you have stepped off to stare at the Virgin, to make sure, and you read: "*¿ . . . no estoy yo aquí / soy tu madre. . . ?*" Am I not here, am I not your mother? For the first time, the *anciana* has stopped, too, but at the opening of another hallway over there, so that you can see her old face even if it's at a distance, and she is looking back at you, and she seems pleased. You look away and up for only a moment, since you have selfishly stepped onto the gliding platform once more, and when you look back, she has disappeared without you ever thanking her.

El Paso

A few weeks ago, I got a note from a magazine editor in Houston. She'd read something I'd written, liked it, and wondered, as she put it, why anyone with any sense was living in El Paso. . . . A few days ago, I was up in Albuquerque, wandering in and out of bookstores, almost breathless with culture shock. A friend, a native of Roswell, said, "I grew up thinking El Paso was the big city, and you're telling me the only bookstores there are in *malls*?" . . . The phone rings, and it's another friend who's in Los Angeles. "How's life in the pachuco barrios?" he asks, thinking I'm some kind of exile living on the meanest of the Chicano mean streets, which, I'm sure, he imagines to be unpaved dirt, lined with pink brothels and all-night bars and bad-ass cholos and their rucas who lay claim to most of it.

I like to run up and down the bleachers at Austin High School (like? I *do* it), which is almost my backyard. I especially like it when I'm done and I can stretch out on the topmost aluminum bench. Both the Franklins and the Sierra Madres are so much more intimate from this height, and the city, and Juárez—indistinguishable from up here—look so innocent and plain under all the expanse. Below me, coaches, men and women ones, have the stopwatches running. The girls in the middle of the football field are stretching

their legs, and the boys at the opposite end of the track are splaying over low hurdles. There's another field below, and the baseball team is there. I can hear the tang of ball against metal bat. At the other end of that field, my oldest son is playing soccer with his team, and I'm on the watch for the two new boys from Honduras, who, claims the coach, will make them unbeatable. Then I see my baby boy, four years old, coming over to find me. He goes through the maze and tangle of the basketball and handball courts and players, disappears behind the rock wall—*these*, rock walls, are El Paso—on one side of the tennis courts, then I see him again, on the mesh-fence side of the courts, then he's through the gate and onto the track. Nobody objects to him—that is El Paso. A girl he bumps into rubs his head, and he rounds the rim of the outside lane, where runners and coach practice the baton pass. And there he is at the bottom of the bleachers looking up at me. Hey!

It's all-America, except El Paso does not belong to the United States. Don't misunderstand. It doesn't belong to Mexico, either. Nor does El Paso reside in the Great State of Texas. *We all know that*. We hear those senators in Austin chuckling when they decide a nuclear dump forty miles away from us is just *the* perfect location. Teeheehee, snarksnark. And so we vacation on the West Coast. The San Diego Zoo. Universal Studios.

And now New Mexico wouldn't have us. Too late. They don't even want to share water. Get your own river! *Jajajojo* (they're bilingual there).

El Paso's the best of Mexican culture: moms, dads, brothers, sisters, babies, the cuñados and suegros, compadres and comadres. Grandfathers teach Spanish proverbs. Grandmothers walk children to school. Drivers go slow. In those big American cars. Even in the trucks. In life, too. But these are los estados: hear the rock music in that car cruising by? See that glow of television against that wall? Look—Burger King, Mac's, even Taco Bell! Yech. But lots of places to rent movies (only American-made ones), and JCPenney, Sears, Pic 'N' Save. Over at the Safeway on the west

side, they sell California wine (the *smaller* bottles), and French coffee beans, and English tea (who buys that?).

A guy comes to my door. He's my age. Mid-thirties. He asks if I could give him some help, he needs to get back across. Formal Spanish. Respectful. A few weeks ago, two teenage girls asked me the same thing. I got the jumper cables. Exactly what? I ask him. Money? Please, he says. I give him two dollars. The boy with him, maybe four, or five, maybe he's six, he clutches a sweater he has on, stretching the fabric, staring at me.

My next-door neighbor sometimes talks to me in English, as if I don't know any Spanish, and sometimes in Spanish, as if I don't know any English. One time his son (I think he is—my neighbor has all these young dudes with "the look" hanging out in front of his house: they wear baggy gray plaid shirts buttoned to the top and baggy black pants) came over to ask if it was all right if he parked a car on the dirt part of our front yard. Just for a little bit while they worked on this other car. They have a few cars parked off the curb next door. Of course I didn't mind.

It gets hot in El Paso. In case you didn't know that. *Windy sometimes, too. That blows the pollution away.* (Too much pollution: Juárez? Spend a day there. Watch those cars. Think what would happen to *your* brain if you slept in that exhaust. Think about your brain if you had no choice but to own that car. It's another reason you'd move across, too.) But sometimes that wind gets bad. Maybe you heard that. Did you hear about the snow? Sometimes it snows. Kids break out the carrot noses and tomato eyes and throw snowballs. Until their hands get cold. Nobody thinks of gloves around here.

When the poet Denise Levertov came to town, it was decided that a party for her shouldn't be *open* to just *anyone* who might dress any old way. So an invite list to the Paso del Norte Hotel was made; it excluded, omitted the wrong kind. Nobody around here seemed to think that was anything to get too upset about.

Easter Sunday I got to see Jorge de Jesus "El Gleason" at the Plaza Monumental. The guy is nuts. I swear I saw him get gored by that one bull, and I *did* see that bull's hind leg jack his head when he fell under. The cockfight season is back, too. I hear they're having some in . . . better not say where, because it might be an illegal site.

So why do the best people have to leave El Paso? A friend of mine, an ironworker, was foreman on a project. He made \$9 an hour. When they got to the end of the job, with a week or so of spot welding to go, the company laid him off and kept the guy they could pay \$4.50 an hour. I recently did a job, carpentry, for \$6 an hour. Why \$6? "I asked around," this guy tells me (he's a nice guy, too), "and I heard I could get a carpenter for from \$4 to \$6 an hour, and I took the top figure." It was an office remodel. Somebody before me framed it up. Everything was out of plumb. I had to custom-hang three doors. For his interior walls, I used the best redwood tongue and groove available, at a dollar-fifty a foot, about 1,450 feet worth. Just think if I'd cut that wood as lousy as the walls were framed. I needed the money anyway. When I really need it, I go out of town, where I am paid what I'm worth.

I hear the bugle playing "Taps" at night. Fort Bliss. And the train. Pounding the earth. It's dark. Real dark. Lotsa stars. You should get up on my roof and sit for a while (the ladder I borrowed is still there. I just replaced the pads in the swamp cooler). Now *that's* something! The city lit up like the sky.

Can't forget Chico's Tacos on Dyer Street. Extra cheese is fifteen cents. Burgers for a dollar. So what if the buns are a little stale sometimes. The jukebox is always going, and dress any way you want (GI, biker, teenybopper, badass, sexy, fat), and it's open late. I like the menu do from the bakery on Fort. Think we'll go get some tomorrow. I guess I'm hungry.