

## **The Heart Is a River Above All Things**

**By: Shabnaz Khandoker**

I saw you from down below once  
When I drove through Long Beach,  
The way you swayed in the balcony summer air  
Like a jacaranda dancing to the dream of my fictional American suburbia,  
Laughing in the face of it - it was a punch to my gut &  
I couldn't look away.

Present day: Hazy Los Angeles where  
Psychic mediums are using internet mediums,  
Land of burnt coffee heartbreaks and quiet political musings.  
The rapturous center of the cosmos where ashes rain from the sky,  
With bones crackling deep in the closet.

At the scorching crack of dawn,  
The blunt of my gaze locked with Mother Mary's on the wall  
As she cradles the sacred corazón haloed by licks of candlelight.  
I want to know just how much she can endure, so I can wash away this guilt of mine.

Speaking of vices,  
I wear a relic of Mary Magdalene around my neck,  
Secure in her protection before I  
Douse myself in agua de florida to invoke the spirits to calm my nerves.  
In the mirror, the god of small indulgences watches over me.

Flowers are withering in the inmigrante's arms from the midday  
Heat out on the corner of the off-ramp,  
Kind of like the way I couldn't take it any longer when  
I last saw you but I stood there flustered and powerless, back against the jaguar mural, as  
I watched you walk away from me.

My father, an opinionated if contradictory man,  
Talk of religion at dinner last night:  
He said, the sinners are a blight and must repent for their erroneous ways and that  
It doesn't matter who's watching from the sky,  
So long as you got wings, fly.

Diós mío, but I'm a butterfly at the edge of paradise:  
Not quite East Los, just on the outskirts, and  
All I can think about is the way nothing, not my father, not the chain link fences, not even  
The dogs and hustlers in these barrios  
Could keep me away from your Chicana arms today.

Weathered and beaten but  
Strong in the way they embrace the dirt and dig  
Deep into the roots of the community garden, the way  
They swing with surprise and grace at the boxing club in the evenings.

Later, in the strawberry light, the shape of your proud, bent nose  
Tipped just above the horizon,  
And it tells me everything I need to know to survive, as we  
Sit out here on the cracked pavement in our dirty Vans circled by rubber bullets.

The hope remains in the curve of your cheekbone when  
We are all bruised and exhausted, our hearts  
Humming, from protesting in the streets.  
Hunahpu, the thick, tainted air is heavy and sweet with miracles, as  
I press my lips to your temple and you insist,  
Our wealth of hair tangling into blackness.

I wish I was born a river  
Rough yet smooth in its course  
Knowing who it is eternally,  
So the adopted Spanglish off my lips could divine  
And name the tender pull of me to you  
Instead of getting me into trouble all the time.

I'm not sure what will happen  
When the voices of la gente become crashing waves,  
Deafening in anger and mourning, because  
The blood was spilled and reparations must be made.

But for now, I'm caught in the way you glow  
In the light of the little fuegos everywhere.