

JOSÉ PADUA

Kubla Khan

This poem is writing itself on a bathroom wall
in 1992 when I am drunk and drinking too much
and am probably in need of some kind of guidance,
which of course I won't seek and would refuse
if given, because now that I think about it again
I don't need any direction, I know where
I'm going and who I'm taking there with me.
The poem is about constipation, my rapid heartbeat,
my daily morning headache, and the woman singing
loudly and badly down the hall from my apartment.
She used to avoid eye contact with me, but now she
nods and sometimes stares, having recognized that
despite my smooth hands and soft voice I am one
of her tribe. Her boyfriend even makes the effort
to speak to me in English instead of mumbling at me
in Spanish, a language they thought I would under-
stand and which if I were a better person I would
understand but I'm not. There are no air-conditioners
in this building. No one can afford to buy one and
if someone were to steal one he or she could not afford
to turn it on. Fans blow the hot air back upon us,
the speed being what makes it more bearable. My
mattress lies on the floor, and when I'm there
the air is filled with smoke and sound, a symphony
of car alarms wrapping itself around me like a blanket
of insecurity gifted to me with a bouquet of parking
violations. We are not moving here, and the cars
don't belong to us but to the people who are trying
to avoid us and the liquid look we give them
when we pass through their valuable white spaces.
When I dream I am driving fast with the windows down
into tunnels that pass through both tenements and high rises
at the time of day when the heat is most dangerous.
I drive until I am surrounded everywhere by words,
until there is nowhere to turn, no exit to take,
until the pure sound of water wakes me.