

“Race Politics”

By Luis Rodriguez
From Cool Salsa (1994)

My brother and I
—shopping for la jefita—
decided to get the “good food”
over on the other side
Of the tracks.

We dared each other.
Laughed a little.
Thought about it.
Said, what’s the big deal.
Thought about that.
Decided we were men,
not boys.
Decided we should go wherever
we damn wanted to.

Oh, my brother—now he was bad.
Tough dude. Afraid of nothing.
I was afraid of him.

So there we go,
climbing over
the iron and wood ties,
over discarded sofas
and bent-up market carts,
over a weed-and-dirt road,
into a place called South Gate
—all white. All-American.

We entered the forbidden
narrow line of hate,
imposed,
transposed,
supposed,
a line of power/powerlessness
full of meaning,
meaning nothing—
those lines that crisscross

the abdomen of this land,
that strangle you
in your days, in your nights.
When you dream.
There we were, two Mexicans,
six and nine—from Watts, no less.
Oh, this was plenty reason
to hate us.

Plenty reason to run up behind us.
Five teenagers on bikes.
Plenty reason to knock
the groceries out from our arms—
a splattering heap of soup
cans, bread and candy.

Plenty reason to hold me down
on the hot asphalt; melted gum
and chips of broken
beer bottle on my lips and cheek.

Plenty reason to get my brother
by the throat, taking turns
punching him in the face,
cutting his lip,
punching, him vomiting.

Punching until swollen and dark blue
he slid from their grasp
like a rotten banana from its peeling.

When they had enough, they threw us back,
dirty and lacerated,
back to Watts, its towers shiny
across the orange-red sky.

My brother then forced me
to promise not to tell anybody
how he cried.
He forced me to swear to God,
to Jesus Christ, to our long-dead

Indian Grandmother—
keepers of our meddling souls.