War (in the City in Which I Live)

Benjamin Alire Sáenz
(2006)

All my life—let me say this so you understand—all my life
I have heard stories of the river and how people were willing
To die to cross it. To die just to get to other side. The other
Side was the side I lived on. “And people die to get here?”

My mother nodded at my question in that way that told me
She was too busy to discuss the matter and went back
To her ritual of rolling out tortillas for her seven children, some
Of whom asked questions she had no answers for. We were
Poor as a summer without rain, an outhouse and a pipe

Bringing in cold water from a well that was unreliable
As the white man’s treaties with the Indians, unreliable
As my drunk uncles, unreliable as my father’s Studebaker
Truck. I was six. It was impossible for me to fathom
Why anyone would risk death for the chance to live like us.

I have heard people laugh when
They see the Rio Grande for the first time. That is the river?
But that river has claimed a thousand lives, Mexicans caught
In its currents mistaking the river as something tame, and in
One second devouring them whole. The survivors

Have handed down this lesson: Nothing in the desert is
Tame. Not the people, not the sand, not the winds, not
The sun, not even the river that resembles a large ditch
And laughed at by visitors and locals alike. Nothing

In the desert has ever had anything resembling mercy

On Mexicans attempting to leave their land, to become
Something they weren’t meant to be.

People are still crossing. People are still dying. Some have
Died suffocating in box cars. Some have drowned. Some
Have been killed by vigilantes who protect us in the name

Of all that is white. Some have died in a desert larger than
Their dreams. Some were found, no hint of their names
On their remains. In the city that is my home, Border Patrol
Vans are as ubiquitous as taxi cabs in New York. Green Vans
Are a part of my landscape, a part of my imagination, no less

Than the sky or the river or the ocotillos blooming in spring.
The West is made of things that make you bleed. I no longer
Hang images of summer clouds or Indians carrying pots on their
Talented heads or Mexican peasants working the land with magic
Hands. On my walls, I no longer hang paintings of the Holy Poor.
We have been fighting a war on this border
For hundreds of years. We have been fighting the war so long
That the war has become as invisible as the desert sands we
Trample on.

I do not know how long all this will continue. Peace
Is like the horizon. We can see it in the distance
But it is always far and we can never touch it.

Every day
In what passes for a newspaper in the city in which
I live, someone writes a letter ranting against the use
Of the Spanish language because this is America and I can
Taste the hate in the letter, can almost feel the spit
In the letter writer's mouth and I know we could not
Ever speak about this without one of us wanting to hurt
The other in the city in which I live.

I will tell you a sad story: White people are moving away
From this city that has claimed my heart. They are running away
From my people. They are running away from all that keeps
Us poor. I want them to stay and fight. I want them
To stay and live with my people. We have chased them
Away. I want them to love the people who make the food
They love. We have chased them away—are you happy? Are you
Happy? And there are people waiting in line, spending
Their fortunes just for a chance to enter, waiting, just blocks
Away from where I sit, waiting to come over, waiting in Juárez
Just to cross the river, from China and India and all the nations
Of Africa and Central America and Asia. No poet, no engineer, no
Politician, no philosopher no artist, no novelist has ever
Dreamed a solution. I am tired of living in exile. I am tired
Of chasing others off the land.

Let me say this again. Again. Again.
I want, I want this war to end. To end.

CONSIDER
1. As a child, how does Sáenz experience his life in the United States? Why do people even “from China and India and all the nations” want to come here?
2. What details throughout the poem convey Sáenz’s sense of the West as he has experienced it? What kind of territory is it that people are fighting over in this borderland? Why might it still have claimed his heart?

CHALLENGE
3. Sáenz writes that he is “tired of living in exile” and “tired / Of chasing others off the land.” In an argument, try to reconcile those seemingly contradictory perspectives. What does it mean to be an exile from a place? Who in his poem are among the exiles? What would need to happen for the war he describes to end?
ITEM 4.17  • Joe Grossinger, from *El Paso Street Art*, 2007

Included among the *El Paso Street Art* photographs Joe Grossinger has posted on his Flickr site are a series of shots like these of decorated overpasses on I-10—which cuts through the Texas city.