

EL TAJIN*

After our agent's words got snuffed
on some wire between here and L.A.
we had no choice but to bribe

for a car. How can you chirp for help
when the phones speak only Spanish?
This *amigo* needed no table for fingers

to sneak him greasy bills; like a taxman
he held out an arrogant hand until pesos
blossomed a smile. Underfoot, a cat fatly

purred siesta preludes. He dangled keys.
"With Budget, you're *numero uno*," he said.
"For maps, no charge!" I pocketed my credit.

*This is one of Mexico's most stimulating
sites, though the origin of its inhabitants
remains a mystery. Ignore those Indians:*

*since their blood descends from Chichimecs,
they have no stake in Mayan stones. Exert
such lines of influence and your bones become*

*historic. Huastec swords won Teotihuacan
while Cortes was still a dark planet
at the edge of some sleepy god's premonition.*

Petrol's another scam. What of their wells?
Years ago, the State shucked Shell, ejected Esso.
Now they sprinkle Holy Water to harmonize

their pumps. So we filled up at Veracruz,
splurging on orange juice and tequila against
expected heat. As we idled at a stop light

two Indian kids ambushed us from either side,
the girl nudging pinched roses at the window,
the boy buffing headlights with his tee-shirt.

Their dark eyes emptied our change.
But no *gracias, señor, gracias senora*;
instead, in unison, "Have a nice day, folks!"

*The Pyramid of Niches. In each, a myth
echoes fertile as sea swelling in a salty
shell. These six tiers were once temple*

*steps to friezes of gods who shouldered
the sky. In drought, Chac demanded child's
blood to spill his thunder for thirsty roots.*

*Our famous flying pole dancers perform
in the central plaza at dusk just before
the sound and light show. Please, no coins.*

When our eyes divert from the asphalt,
past impinges on present. Here, no fences
shade the poverty. Mud and straw hunker

down against the sun. Do these dusty
knees know their Mayan ancestors
invented the zero? I want to apologise

for our car, an absurd speck fleeting
across this parched canvas. But then,
I'm too proud: we're as invisible to them

as a star spurting across some muffled
horizon. Still, why don't we pause, open
doors? Maybe our engine *will* overheat.

* An archaeological site in Veracruz. Its Pyramid of Niches has 365 separate niches.

JENNIFER WOODHOUSE

MARATHON

in early spring

The mound bleeds red anemones
through gashes in soft grass;
the battlefield pulsates with life
of wings, wildflowers, bees.

Mountains since heroic times
watch over Marathon;
where Milteiadis' army fought,
the young boys play at sport.

It is the season of new growth,
a quickening of trees,
Apollo's laurels flowering
all over Greece.

The mountains recall Pheidippi's
epic, as if yesterday
he ran until his heart burst,
with news for the Athenians.

The mountains look on Marathon,
and bear themselves
with pride, like Greeks.