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.