

Poem II:

Right in One Language

Exercise II.1:

“Right in one language” contains an implicit question: “How do you choose the language in which you write a line of poetry?” This poem expresses the poet’s perspective on language, contrasting it to “agents” and “critics” and those who want her to “Think Shaker room” when she writes a “garden growing wild.”

Tafolla also engages here in the code-switching—using English and Spanish, as well as regional TexMex-Spanglish—a technique which throughout Chicana/o literature transforms the our everyday vernacular speech into an effective literary language. Tafolla even code-switches ideas and cultural backgrounds when she calls Chaucer (another code-switching poet) an “old Pachuco playing his TexMex onto the page...”

This poem is aesthetically complex and intellectually exciting; but it also has a message to convey. Map the geography of this poem that takes us through several pages from “glares hairy brows over foreign words” to the “two tongues inside this kiss.” Find yourself in this geography and write a poem from that perspective.

Visually, this poem is “all over the page”—fitting with the topic; however, the lines have a visual rhythm, leaping across the page at intervals like tongues of wildfire creeping out, horizontally across dry grassland. How does the spacing on the page reflect the meaning of the words?

This poem takes a stand on an issue of importance to the poet. What issues are important to you? Choose an issue that is important to you, and phrase it as a question to yourself. Write a poem that answers that question in more than one way. If you know more than one language, experiment by using both. Experiment with creating or enhancing meaning by the appearance of the lines on the page.

— Exercise provided by Kamala Platt, author of *On the Line*