Fences

SUMMARY

Laughing heartily, tourists arrive at the tall hotel, their luggage full of American currency.

In the mornings, my brother finds work making the beach (cooled by the night) nice and smooth for the tourists. With a flat piece of wood, he wipes away all the footprints from the day before.

Looking through a spiky wall of cacti, I watch female tourists coat themselves in sweet-smelling sunblock, rubbing it into their limbs. Their kids play in the sea or drink sweet beverages, using long straws to enjoy the white coconut or yellow mango flavors.

One time, my younger sister took off barefoot across the hot beach, desperate to try one of those drinks.

My mother stopped her and scolded her, her voice as loud as the waves themselves. She said that the beach belongs only to the tourists.

THEMES

CLASS, PRIVILEGE, AND INEQUALITY

Set in a Spanish-speaking tourist town, "Fences" describes a world in which money is king. Differences in economic (and perhaps racial) privilege effectively divide this town into two classes: the haves (tourists) and the have-nots (locals). The former enjoy a life of luxury, sunning themselves on the beach, while the latter—like the speaker and their family—have to keep their distance and/or provide services to the tourists. Money, or the lack of it, acts as an insurmountable "fence" between the two groups. The poem shows how class privilege creates a restrictive and unequal society, barring the less fortunate from their own local resources while granting the rich access to virtually anything.

The poem begins by contrasting tourists' experience of a coastal paradise with that of the speaker's family. A "tall hotel" full of "*turistas*" (tourists) looms over the town, the speaker says; tourists (most likely non-Spanish-speaking Americans) arrive with "suitcases full of dollars," which buy them access to the town, its beaches, and the locals' services. (The reference to "dollars"—the currency of the U.S., a country strongly associated with racial and wealth inequality—implies that these tourists wield racial and/or ethnic privilege in this area as well.)

For these tourists, the town represents leisure time: the women luxuriate in the sun; their children play in the "waves" and drink big, sugary "drinks" without a care in the world. But one person's leisure, the poem suggests, is another person's labor. The apparently carefree atmosphere of the town comes at a cost beyond the tourists' "dollars," making the locals second-class citizens in their own region.

In a world governed by money, the poem implies, the locals need the tourist industry in order to survive. Their work requires them to maintain the illusion that the town belongs to the tourists, not to them. The speaker's brother, for example, finds work smoothing the beach over every morning, making it pristine for the foreign sun-seekers. (Symbolically, this smoothing-over also suggests how this unjust system *hides* its messy realities.) The speaker's mom, meanwhile, scolds the speaker's little sister for running on the beach just like the tourist children do. The mother, it seems, understands the harsh economics at work here: even the *appearance* of a local on the beach would disrupt the illusion that the beach exists solely for the tourists' enjoyment.

The unequal relationship between locals and tourists creates a restrictive, "fence[d]"-off society. The young speaker might not fully understand this relationship, but they seem to sense its unfairness. The speaker can only "peek" at the tourists' world through a "cactus fence." In other words, class inequality creates a border (both real and symbolic) between haves and have-nots, dividing them as if with a wall of threatening spikes. The locals are not only barred from the *luxuries* of the tourists (hotel stays, etc.), they're barred from the simple pleasures of their own local area, such as walking on the beach. Simply by virtue of the economic class they were born into (and perhaps their race/ethnicity as well), the speaker is sharply limited in their opportunities. If "dollars" buy leisure and "laughter," the poem implies, *lack* of money brings unrewarding work and general unhappiness.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-19

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Mouths full of ...
... full of dollars.

"Fences" is set in a Spanish-speaking seaside town. In this first stanza ("Mouths full [...] dollars"), "*turistas*" (the Spanish word for tourists) arrive with cash to spend and act as if the place belongs to them. The locals are tasked with maintaining this illusion—though, arguably, the power of money makes the

illusion pretty real.

Notice that it's the tourists who appear in the poem first, rather than the speaker or the speaker's family (who are locals). This ordering subtly reflects their sense of entitlement: tourists first, locals second. And it's their *noise* that arrives first: their "Mouths full of laughter" (line 1). The tourists have entered holiday mode, walking around carelessly, without a thought for the locals who actually live in the area. They stay in a "tall hotel" that looms above the locals, suggesting their (conscious or unconscious) sense of superiority. Their cackling mouths, which almost seem disembodied, make for a disturbing first image. The /l/ consonance that occurs throughout the stanza seems to echo this loud, obnoxious laughter:

> Mouths full of laughter,
> the *turistas* come to the tall hotel
> with suitcases full of dollars.

This effect is reinforced by the sharp /t/ alliteration and consonance in "turistas, "to," "tall," and "hotel." (The /l/ is a lush, lavish sound, so it might also suggest the way the tourists come to the town to pamper themselves.)

Even in these first few lines, there's a clear juxtaposition developing between the locals and the tourists. The speaker describes them with the Spanish word "*turistas*," marking them out as different while also hinting at the speaker's own identity. The tourists, meanwhile, bring "suitcases full of dollars," suggesting that they've come from the U.S. Their dollars give them access and privileges, allowing them to treat the town as their own playground. The fact that their "suitcases" are "full" of this cash (a somewhat hyperbolic image) hints at their excess and greed, a luxurious lifestyle founded on inequality.

LINES 4-7

> *Every morning my ...*
> *... away all footprints.*

In the second stanza ("Every morning [...] footprints"), the focus shifts to the speaker's brother, who, like other locals, finds menial work in the tourist industry. His job is to make the beach nice and smooth before the day's tourists arrive—as if no one had walked on the beach the day before. In other words, he creates the illusion that the beach is a kind of untouched paradise just waiting to be enjoyed by the tourists. This work makes the beach seem to exist solely "for them" (line 5), giving them the sense that they practically own it.

By calling the tourists "them," the speaker marks them as a group distinct from "us" (the locals). In this way, the poem juxtaposes those who provide services with those who benefit from (and pay for) those services.

Here and throughout the poem, the ends of sentences always coincide with the end of lines:

> Every morning my brother makes
> the cool beach new for them.
> With a wooden board he smooths
> away all footprints.

This pattern of end-stopping is methodical, like the brother's work. That is, it gives the lines a rhythm that recalls the repetitive motions of physical labor.

Metaphorically, the brother's task also reflects one of the traits of capitalism in general: the way the system tries to hide its negative effects, so that those who pay for its goods and services can enjoy them guilt-free and, ultimately, buy more. (For example, consumers may not know that the metals in their smartphones are often mined by exploited workers; even consumers who do know generally can't *see* the exploitation and confirm that it's happening.) Thus, the smoothing of the beach represents the smoothing-over, or concealment, that helps drive the broader economy.

LINES 8-10

> *I peek through ...*
> *... arms and legs*

In lines 8-10 ("I peek [...] arms and legs"), the speaker—who is most likely a child—watches the tourists on the beach through a "cactus fence." Spiky /k/ consonance brings the forbidding cactus spikes to life on the page:

> I peek through the cactus fence

This fence separates the Spanish-speaking locals (like the speaker) from the tourists, making it seem as if the beach exists only for the latter. (In a way, it does, thanks to the money-driven system they live under.) Contrast these harsh /k/ sounds with the smooth alliteration and consonance of the next two lines, which juxtapose the speaker with the women on the beach:

> and watch the women rub oil
> sweeter than honey into their arms and legs

These words flow easily, suggesting how much easier life is on the other side of the fence. The liquid /w/ and /l/ sounds and nasal /n/ sounds glide like oil on the skin! The reference to honey evokes pleasure and indulgence, a world from which the speaker is totally excluded. The childlike perspective heightens the strangeness of the division, as if the speaker can sense that the beach is off-limits, but doesn't quite understand why.

Notice, too, that the title uses the plural form: "Fences." This cactus fence is just one fence among many. In fact, most of the fences in this speaker's world aren't physical constructions: they're economic, social, ethnic, and racial barriers that divide global society into *haves* and *have-nots*. For the locals, the beach is a site of work; for the tourists, it's a place of luxury and

relaxation.

The first four lines of this stanza are enjambed, suggesting that the world the speaker's peering into is one of nearly *uninterrupted* enjoyment. Perhaps, too, this uninhibited flow suggests a sense of excitement on the speaker's part—as though they're looking in on something they're not meant to see.

LINES 11-13

while their children ...
... white, mango yellow.

Lines 11-13 ("while their children [...] mango yellow") form the second half of the stanza's long sentence. Here, the young speaker observes their counterparts: the tourists' children. Though they're just on the other side of the fence, these American kids seem to live in an entirely different world—one of play, freedom, and sugary drinks:

> [...] their children jump waves
> or sip drinks from long straws,
> coconut white, mango yellow.

Like their parents, these children enjoy the beach with barely a thought for the locals—people like the speaker's brother, who has to smooth out the beach every morning before the tourists arrive. For these children, this is a world of pure, uninterrupted fun. They have their needs and desires catered to, just like their parents with "suitcases full of dollars." Even that little word "or" indicates that the children have a *choice* of how to spend their time.

In other words, capitalism finds a way to satisfy everyone who has the money to pay for that satisfaction (of course, it's the parents paying here). The children's desire for something sweet is easily indulged; they even have multiple flavors to choose from (and plastic straws to drink through). Lines 12-13 provide a sense of the immediate sensory enjoyment of these drinks; the assonance of "sip drinks" and "coconut white, mango yellow" makes the lines themselves go down smooth and easy. The asyndeton in line 13 suggests that these are just two flavors among many—another way of suggesting that money buys freedom of choice.

LINES 14-19

Once my little ...
... It's their beach."

In the poem's final two stanzas, the speaker tells a brief anecdote. The speaker's "little sister" once ran across the sand, hoping to try one of the brightly colored sugary drinks for sale on the beach. The simplicity of the diction in lines 14-16 suggests that this was a simple, natural impulse:

> Once my little sister
> ran barefoot across the hot sand
> for a taste.

The lively /t/ consonance in "little sister [...] barefoot [...] hot [...] taste" seems to mirror the young girl's frantic, hot-footed pace. The way "for a taste" gets its own line makes the little girl's desire seem harmlessly small—which it is!

In another way, though, it's not: her presence on the beach would shatter the illusion that it exists only for the tourists. The little sister hasn't yet learned that the beach is effectively off-limits for people in her economic class. (Her exclusion may relate to racial divisions, too.) The speaker knows to stay behind the cactus fence; her brother knows the beach is a place of work, not pleasure; but the little sister is still innocent of the divisions imposed by money and capitalism.

As the last stanza shows, the speaker's mother understands these divisions only too well. Immediately stepping in, she "roar[s] like the ocean" (line 17). This simile—the only one in the poem—suggests how frightening and elemental the mother's voice becomes in this moment. It's as though the whole system might be threatened by one little girl going somewhere she's not meant to go. The poem ends on the mother's words, marking them as especially powerful:

> "No. No. It's their beach.
> It's their beach."

In plain language, the mother conveys the rules of the system that shapes the tourists' and locals' experience. Even though the tourists aren't from the area, they effectively have ownership of the beach—because they have the money to pay for it. The locals are excluded from a part of their own area, again because money says so. The repetition of "No" and "It's their beach" makes the mom's words both haunting and decisive: there is absolutely no way the speaker's little sister will be allowed among the tourists. This small incident reveals the wider forces at play in these characters' society—the way capitalism excludes all but a lucky few from power, wealth, and leisure. While the beach isn't protected completely by physical fences, the social and economic fences around it are all but insurmountable.

SYMBOLS

SMOOTHING THE BEACH

The beach is central to "Fences," as it's the main reason the "*turistas*" come to town. To them, the beach is a site of leisure and carefree fun; to the locals, it's a place of work and exclusion. The tourists expect the beach to feel like it's untouched, a corner of paradise reserved just for them. To maintain this illusion, the speaker's brother smooths

out the sand before the tourists arrive each day, wiping away the evidence that anyone has been there before.

This process symbolizes the unseen labor that upholds the wealthy and privileged class's comfort. It reflects the way that the capitalist system tends to cover its tracks, offering consumers products and services without forcing them to think about what labor went into those products and services (or who suffered in the process of creating them). The beach is a zone of exclusion reserved for those who can afford it. Locals stepping into this zone (at the wrong hour) would upset the tourists' sense of privilege—which is why the mother gets so angry with the speaker's sister when she runs into it.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-7:** "Every morning my brother makes / the cool beach new for them. / With a wooden board he smooths / away all footprints."

THE FENCE

The title refers to multiple "Fences," not just the cactus fence in line 8. That's because the literal fence symbolizes other kinds of barriers: specifically, the social and economic barriers that divide the locals from the tourists.

The cactus fence physically separates these two groups—one poor or working-class, the other wealthy; one Spanish-speaking (likely from Mexico, Central America, or South America), the other presumably not. The fence helps the tourists feel as though the beach exists just for them and that no one has to struggle to maintain it. Meanwhile, for the speaker "peek[ing] through" the fence (line 8), it becomes a window onto the tourists' strange, luxurious world. Notice that the fence shuts the locals out from their own beach, illustrating the way global capitalism, class differences, and racial privilege often bars communities from their own local resources. The cacti also have spikes to deter locals from scaling the fence: a symbol of the violence that sustains the capitalist system.

Ultimately, then, the divisions between locals and tourists don't just depend on this cactus barrier. What really divides the two groups are social and economic forces: class (wealth), race, ethnicity, etc. Thus, the fence illustrates the *inequalities* of the system these characters live under and the way this system excludes some groups to satisfy the desires of others.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-13:** "I peek through the cactus fence / and watch the women rub oil / sweeter than honey into their arms and legs / while their children jump waves / or sip drinks from long straws, / coconut white, mango yellow."

POETIC DEVICES

ASSONANCE

"Fences" uses assonance to bring two of its key images to life. In the third stanza, for example, the speaker describes how the tourists' children spend their time on the beach: either jumping waves or enjoying delicious drinks. Lines 12-13 explain that they:

> [...] sip drinks from long straws,
> coconut white, mango yellow.

The short /ih/ assonance in "sip drinks" makes these beverages sound all the more smooth and pleasant. The line itself goes down easy! The bold /o/ assonance in the following line—which includes the light internal rhyme of "mango" and "yellow"—makes the poem sound as if it's slipped into the language of advertising jingles (imagine these flavors on a billboard). In short, assonance makes the drinks seem more *desirable*—an important and sought-after trait in a capitalist world.

The speaker's little sister desires these drinks herself, and sprints across the sand to try one. Assonance appears in this image, too (lines 14-16):

> Once my little sister
> ran barefoot across the hot sand
> for a taste.

Together with heavy /t/ consonance ("little sister," "barefoot," "hot," "taste"), assonance intensifies the sound of these lines, evoking the intense heat of the sand as well as the eagerness with which the girl runs off.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "cool," "new"
- **Line 6:** "smooths"
- **Line 12:** "sip drinks," "long straws"
- **Line 13:** "coconut," "mango yellow"
- **Line 15:** "ran," "across," "hot," "sand"

ASYNDETON

"Fences" uses asyndeton in line 13:

> [the tourists'] children jump waves
> or sip drinks from long straws,
> coconut white, mango yellow.

It's a subtle effect, but listing the flavors like this makes them seem as if they're part of a longer list. That is, asyndeton makes "coconut white" and "mango yellow" seem to be just two flavors

among many. A connecting "and" would imply that these are the *only* two flavors available, but the poem wants the reader to imagine what else might be on offer (raspberry red, anyone?).

Again, part of the point here is that these privileged tourists *get* to enjoy a range of drink options. Capitalism both caters to and fuels their desires, while denying the locals (including the speaker's "little sister") any luxurious options at all.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "coconut white, mango yellow."

CONSONANCE

Though "Fences" uses disarmingly spare language, it features some prominent consonance (including alliteration). This sound patterning makes the poem more vivid, bringing its images and ideas to life.

Take the opening stanza, in which noisy American tourists arrive:

> Mouths full of laughter,
> the *turistas* come to the tall hotel
> with suitcases full of dollars.

All these /l/ and /t/ sounds have an over-the-top quality that seems to capture the obnoxiousness of the tourists' laughter. The reader—like the locals—seems to *hear* these Americans arrive before seeing them!

Later, the speaker, excluded from the local beach due to their economic class (and, perhaps, race or ethnicity), watches the tourists through a cactus fence. Spiky /k/ sounds make this fence seem more forbidding: "I peek through the cactus fence" (line 8). Contrast these harsh consonants with the smooth /w/ alliteration in "watch the women rub oil" and "while their children jump waves" (lines 9 and 11), or the luxurious /s/ sibilance in "sip drinks from long straws" (line 12). The speaker's exclusion from the tourists' leisurely world manifests itself even in the sounds of the poem!

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "full," "laughter"
- **Line 2:** "turistas," "to," "tall hotel"
- **Line 3:** "suitcases," "full," "dollars"
- **Line 4:** "morning my," "makes"
- **Line 6:** "With," "wooden board"
- **Line 8:** "peek," "cactus"
- **Line 9:** "watch," "women"
- **Line 11:** "while," "waves"
- **Line 12:** "sip," " drinks," "straws"
- **Line 13:** "coconut white"
- **Line 14:** "little sister"
- **Line 15:** "barefoot," "hot"
- **Line 16:** "taste"
- **Line 17:** "My mother"

ENJAMBMENT

"Fences" uses enjambment and end-stopping to highlight the contrasting worlds of the "*turistas*" and the locals. In the second stanza, for example, the two devices work together to help illustrate the speaker's brother's job:

> Every morning my brother makes
> the cool beach new for them.
> With a wooden board he smooths
> away all footprints.

The alternation of enjambments and full stops gives this passage a stop-start rhythm, mimicking the rhythm of the brother's task as he drags the board back and forth.

The following stanza (lines 8-11) provides a glimpse of the tourists' world:

> I peek through the cactus fence
> and watch the women rub oil
> sweeter than honey into their arms and legs
> while their children jump waves

The rush of enjambment here suggests freedom and leisure—though not the speaker's. The tourists' world has no restrictions or inhibitions; accordingly, this passage lacks restrictions at the ends of lines. The uninterrupted flow of the language might also suggest that the speaker is excited by what they see.

A few lines later, the speaker's sister, too young to know any better, rushes onto the beach:

> Once my little sister
> ran barefoot across the hot sand
> for a taste. (lines 14-16)

The enjambment here captures the young girl's innocent excitement—the beach seems like fun, so she runs towards it. The end stop in line 16 (after "taste") brings this energy to a sudden halt, as her mother makes clear that she's not allowed on the sand.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "hotel / with"
- **Lines 4-5:** "makes / the"
- **Lines 6-7:** "smooths / away"
- **Lines 8-9:** "fence / and"

- **Lines 9-10:** “oil / sweeter”
- **Lines 10-11:** “legs / while”
- **Lines 11-12:** “waves / or”
- **Lines 14-15:** “sister / ran”
- **Lines 15-16:** “sand / for”
- **Lines 17-18:** “ocean, / "No.”

JUXTAPOSITION

"Fences" juxtaposes (presumably American) tourists with the local, Spanish-speaking residents of a resort town. Though they share the same geographical space, these groups effectively live in two different worlds. The main source of division is money. Compare the first two stanzas:

> Mouths full of laughter,
> the *turistas* come to the tall hotel
> with suitcases full of dollars.
> Every morning my brother makes
> the cool beach new for them.
> With a wooden board he smooths
> away all footprints.

The tourists have "dollars" to spend, and they're in full-on vacation mode. Their money buys them leisure and services. For the speaker's brother, on the other hand, the tourist industry means *work*, not pleasure. He earns what he can by performing menial labor, creating the impression that the beach exists only for the tourists' enjoyment.

The poem highlights this class divide by literally placing the speaker and the tourists on either side of a cactus fence. Money buys the tourists *access*, whether to the beach or to sugary drinks for their kids, while for the locals, lack of money prevents access. The poem juxtaposes the tourist kids' experience with that of the speaker's sister, who is forbidden from running onto the beach. (For the tourists, her presence might be an unwelcome reminder that their leisure comes at a local cost; or they might be so prejudiced that they don't want to mingle with people of other classes, races, etc.) While the tourist children casually "jump waves / or sip drinks" (lines 11-12), the speaker's sister gets scolded just for daring to set foot on the sand (lines 17-19).

Through this juxtaposition, the poem shows capitalism at work: how it includes certain people at the expense of others, reshapes communities around the preferences of the rich, and reduces everything to money.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-7
- Lines 11-16

REPETITION

"Fences" uses repetition in its last two lines, as the speaker's mother scolds the speaker's sister for running onto the beach:

> My mother roared like the ocean,
> "No. No. It’s their beach.
> It’s their beach."

The mom repeats both phrases immediately (an example of epizeuxis). It's a revealing moment, suggesting that the little sister's venture onto the beach, though seemingly harmless, is a major transgression. While the beach may be *physically* accessible to the locals, the "Fences" of capitalism—which divide people into distinct economic classes—dictate that the little girl isn't allowed on the sand.

The repetition makes the mother's words sound urgent, as though she's panicking (the fact that she "roar[s] like the ocean" supports this interpretation, too). But it also suggests authority—both her own and that of the capitalist system. She knows how important it is (or how important the rich tourists *feel* it is) to maintain the illusion that the beach exists only for the tourists' enjoyment.

At the same time, repeating phrases holds them up to greater scrutiny. The mom's insistence could be read as excessive, her panic an unnatural byproduct of the system she and her kids live under. The poem thus ends on a provocative note, implicitly asking whether this really *is* "their beach," and if so, why.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 18-19:** “"No. No. It’s their beach. / It’s their beach."”

SIMILE

"Fences" uses just one simile (and no metaphors). Toward the end of the poem (line 17), the speaker remembers what happened when their sister "ran barefoot across the hot sand," hoping to "taste" one of the sweet drinks "sip[ped" by the tourist children:

> My mother roared like the ocean,
> "No. No. It’s their beach.
> It’s their beach."

The mother's shouting sounds as loud as the crashing waves. The simile creates a dramatic moment, making the mother seem at once *frightening* and *frightened* herself (maybe the little sister's transgression jeopardizes the brother's employment on the beach). Her voice seems to hold the elemental power of the ocean—and so does the unequal system whose rules she's reinforcing.

There's irony at play here, too. For the tourists and their kids,

the ocean is a site of fun and freedom. Thus, the little girl's mother sounds like the very thing her family isn't allowed to go and enjoy! Her words underline this division, making it abundantly clear that the beach is reserved for "*turistas*."

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** "My mother roared like the ocean,"

VOCABULARY

Turistas (Lines 2-2) - Spanish for "tourists." This word signals that the local residents of the area, including the speaker, are probably Spanish speakers.

The Cactus Fence (Line 8) - A border made of cacti, meant to exclude people who have not paid for access to the beach.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Fences" doesn't use a traditional poetic form. Instead, it uses stanzas of varying length, with all but the last two serving as a kind of self-contained episode. The poem consists of a tercet (three-line stanza), a quatrain (four-line stanza), a sestet (six-line stanza), and two more tercets.

Each stanza is end-stopped; there's no enjambment between one stanza and the next. One could say, then, that the poem's form "fences in" each stanza, mirroring the poem's literal and symbolic "Fences." It's as though the poem keeps trying to get somewhere, but keeps running into restrictions. Notice that the only stanzas linked directly by narrative are the last two, in which the little sister tries to *cross* the boundary between locals and tourists. For a moment, the poem itself seems to break its own rules. But the attempt doesn't last long: the mother and the end of the poem quickly cut it off.

Each stanza has a different subject: in stanza 1, it's the tourists; in stanza 2, it's the speaker's brother; in stanza 3, the speaker; in stanza 4, the speaker's sister; in stanza 5, the speaker's mother. Formally, it's as though each character (or collective character, in the case of the *turistas*) is fenced off from the rest.

METER

"Fences" is written in free verse, using rhythms that feel pretty close to regular speech. The lack of meter helps give the poem a plainspoken, natural-sounding tone. The speaker is probably a child, so this tone is appropriate to the poem's voice and subject. It also aligns with the poem's down-to-earth diction, allowing the speaker to paint the scene in brief, clear details.

RHYME SCHEME

"Fences" is a free verse poem, so it doesn't use a rhyme scheme. The lack of rhyme and meter adds to the poem's plain style, making its language feel close to natural speech. These choices make sense in part because the poem's speaker is most likely a child.

Line 13 ("Coconut [...]. yellow.") does contain something like an internal rhyme: "mango yellow." This phrase describes one of the drink flavors on offer to the tourists' children. The rhyme is kind of gaudy, as though mimicking the language of advertising—designed to attract desire and dollars!

SPEAKER

The poem is written from a first-person perspective. The speaker lives in a resort town frequented by (presumably American) tourists. The speaker's use of "*turistas*" (Spanish for "tourists") in line 2 suggests that the town is predominantly Spanish-speaking (perhaps somewhere in Mexico or Central America).

The speaker appears to be a child, probably the middle child of three. The speaker's brother is old enough to work on the beach in the morning, while their "little sister" is too young to understand that she can't go on the beach. The speaker's innocent perspective—particularly in stanza 3, as they peek through the cactus fence ("I peek [...] mango yellow")—makes the locals' exclusion from the beach seem all the more unfair and inexplicable. The speaker shows a childlike curiosity at this moment, looking in on the tourists' world as if it's a different planet.

Because the speaker's circumstances (including age) differ substantially from the poet's, the poem can be read as a brief dramatic monologue.

SETTING

"Fences" is set in an unspecified Spanish-speaking town where tourists come to enjoy the beach and spend their "suitcases full of dollars" (currency that implies these tourists are from the U.S.).

Even though it's in one geographical setting, two parallel worlds exist side-by-side here. For the tourists, this is a place to let loose and soak up the sun; for the locals, it's the place where they earn a living. The "tall hotel" looms over the town, suggesting the economic power the tourists hold over the locals. A threatening "cactus fence" separates the hardworking locals from the beachgoing tourists. The poem thus shows how class, privilege, and inequality can divide towns and regions, favoring "haves" over "have-nots" and disempowering locals in order to satisfy wealthy outsiders.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Pat Mora is a contemporary American poet, born in El Paso, Texas in 1942. Her grandparents moved to El Paso from northern Mexico, and the Mexican-American border features heavily in Mora's poetry. Mora refers to the southwestern U.S. landscape as "my world, my point of reference" and calls herself a "child of the border." She writes in both English and Spanish, sometimes switching between the two. Speaking about the importance of her Mexican heritage to her work, Mora has said, "When I finally realized that I had a sort of a vein of gold that I had never tapped, it was like opening that treasure chest. My whole Mexican heritage was something that I could write about."

Indeed, the town in "Fences" might well be in Mexico, given the use of the Spanish word "*turistas*" in line 2 and the influx of spend-happy tourists with U.S. currency. The poem was published in Mora's book *Communion* (1991), which examines both the U.S. and Mexico through Mora's multicultural framework. Many of Mora's poems focus on the barriers, both visible and invisible, that divide humanity (as in the case of the cactus fence here). "Legal Alien," for example, focuses on the challenges of being both "bi-lingual [and] bi-cultural [...] an American to Mexicans / A Mexican to Americans." In some Mora poems, however, the border can also be a place of healing and unity.

Mora's work joins a rich tradition of Latin American poetry that has gained greater visibility since the late 20th century. *Communion* appeared in the same decade as acclaimed collections like Francisco X. Alarćon's *Snake Poems: An Aztec Invocation* (1992) and Rhina P. Espaillat's *Where Horizons Go* (1998), as well as influential anthologies such as *El Coro: A Chorus of Latino and Latina Poetry* (1997), edited by Martín Espada. A selection of work by recent and contemporary U.S. Latinx poets is available here.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Published in 1991, "Fences" appeared in the modern era of global capitalism. By this point in history, most—though not all—countries in the world had adopted some form of capitalism (an economic system in which private entities, rather than the people or government, own a country's means of production and operate them for profit). The U.S. has historically been the world's foremost promoter of capitalism, particularly over rival systems like communism. Indeed, since the mid-20th century, the American dollar (see line 3) has dominated this system; it's the world's primary reserve currency and the official currency of the world's richest nation.

The 1990s were a period of relative prosperity, at least for already wealthy countries. However, global inequality worsened during these supposed boom times (as it has throughout the more recent pandemic years). In the previous decade, many Latin American countries, including Mexico, had experienced a severe debt crisis, widening the gap between their prosperity and that of the U.S. Over the past several centuries, many economists and political thinkers have argued that a global system oriented around profit *inevitably* creates such massive inequalities.

"Fences" dramatizes these problems of privilege and inequality in the context of a single town, illustrating a divide between rich tourists and working-class, Spanish-speaking locals. The poem shows how tourism can create a kind of double-bind, providing certain kinds of work on the one hand while producing severe exploitation on the other.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- More Poems and a Biography — Read more about Mora's life and work at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/pat-mora)
- The Cost of Cheap Tourism — An article that looks at the effects of tourism on some of Mexico's coastal cities. (https://jacobinmag.com/2021/04/mexico-tourism-puerto-vallarta-riviera-nayarit)
- Pat Mora Interviewed — The poet talks about her life, work, and Mexican heritage. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PsFSW5yzQg8&list=PLLxDwKxHx1yKumJBwpnoBB
- Latinx Poetry in the U.S. — Poems (and essays) by American writers who have roots in Latin American countries and cultures. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/144542/us-latinx-voices-in-poetry)
- Mora on the Art of Poetry — The poet talks about poetry's special qualities. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sb-DOhCjvhk)

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