

Shades of Brown: Thoughts
of A Young Mexican American Chicano

by

Angel eFe Sandoval

Dedication

to all the beautiful real\\\
fake fallen angels,
to the seven-sinned haters,
to the minority who struggles and stays positive
amid the maddening negativity,
and to the machos y machas who laugh like Mechistas—
porque cuando ya no se puede...
SÍ, SE PUEDE! SÍ, SE PUEDE!
to the innocent:
Raza who had to live these imperfect lines,
to the youngsters just tryin', waiting for the metaphorical midnight...
it's here. it's here!

A Quick Quihúbole

Truth is, I wrote this for the Chicanao Mestizaje del Valle Imperial, for the shades of brown. And so, even though I know this might not shade everyone in The Desert, I hope the *Shades* stretch and reach that certain someone...or two or 70-something-percent.

See, I'm not coming to you with a black\and\or\white perspective here; I'm talking about the shades of brown: and that's the truth, you know. I want you to see the truth, to see your shades.

Cuz, la neta-la neta, the truth comes in shades of brown—just look around. And when truth is written down, truth is poetry. And this is my poetry : these are my *Shades of Brown*.

Puro Chicanao Love.

Angel eFe Sandoval
el Part-Time poeta

CalifAztlán 2012
year of the new movement
c/s

Contents

- 5 Miseducation
- 7 Elemental Fragments
- 8 Flor y Canto
- 9 second crush
- 10 El Barrio on the North End
- 11 The type of vatos I grew up around
- 12 Religion
- 13 The need for love oldies in the north-end barrio
- 14 Chicanadas
- 15 How I became a people of The Desert
- 16 The importance of a (sobres)nombre
- 17 Shades of Brown
- 19 The border (fence)
- 20 On A Street
- 22 This is for La Raza
- 23 On A Street, Bartola Is Heard, Protesting
- 25 love
- 27 Cora
- 28 Coatlicue : Matriarch, Mother, Malinche
- 31 The Chicanito said, “Go ahead and kill us, we’re already dead.”
- 32 Aztlán
- 33 Broken Mirror : IN LAK’ECH
- 34 What TresHuelgas says (about unions and unity)
- 35 Cut-Throat\\\Job opportunity in el Valle
- 36 Migrant Workers
- 37 Going to College

Glossary & Commentary

TresHuelgas says the Truth in Rhythm
which moves
my muse is mostly Blues.

Miseducation

I have learned my lessons very well.
 Pre-school began by teaching me my native tongue was wrong.
 The tongue that spoke the natural Spanglish names of first loves,
 that repeatedly rattled off the names of the few but familiar heroes
 Santos TinTan NanaLupe,
 that named the taste of earth, the air pocket mitotes of tortillas,
 the fiery sting of a cactus tuna, the sightings of a teary-eyed indígena
 —my inherent tongue was *Un-couth Un-acceptable Un-American...*
 But how else could I feel,
 how else could I name what I needed,
 how else could I say what I knew and knew I Loved,
 how else could I give voice to the multi-lingual truths of my mestizoul?
 There is a manipulative beginning to this miseducation,
 to my native tongue being restrained, trained to be tongue-tied,
 to the centuries of my silence.

I BELIEVED

my inglés\\Spanish is wrong...my Pocha—wrong...my Caló is no bueno.
 Every single day, I was taught to assimilate this insidious hate: *I was wrong.*

Every single school day : Chicanitos y Chicanitas :: prison : pintos y pintas

and by fourth grade pochos chased ESLers around the yard
 to teach them English-Only lessons during recess.
 Sticks and stones and broken bones later, in junior high
 Raza was divided\\Ready for the conquest
 some of us claimed Brole XIII,
 some of us rifabamos Chicali XIII.
 By then we could preach and teach the hate and hurt
 —we could spew that cora from our ulcerous guts—
 and since actions spoke louder than words,
 we organized and mobilized barrio-wide rumbles.
 Seething self-hatred was at the heart of the barrio
 warfare that was genocidal suicidal—heartless
 violence the indoctrinated prayed to sacrificed for knew it was euthanasia.

At the beginning of the 21st century,
 in 2000, there was no Chicanao Love mythology being taught.
 The high school black-&-white AmericanLit anthology wrote me off:
 I had no writers,
 no mythology makers.
 I had no poets,
 no Truth tellers.
 I had no voice,
 no beauty, no song,
 no flor, no canto.

Bernice Zamora, José A Villarreal, Evangelina Vigil-P., Luis Valdez, alurista, Mario Suárez,
 Gary Soto, raúlsalinas, Luis Salinas, Ricardo Sánchez, Tomás Rivera, John Rechy, Américo
 Paredes, José Montoya, Luis Leal, Angela de Hoyos, Rolando Hinojosa-S., Juan F Herrera,
 Ernesto Galarza, Lorna D Cervantes, José A Burciaga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Rudolfo Anaya,
 Oscar Z Acosta, Rodolfo F Acuña...written word rebel-rousers!

yet La Raza was taught silence. We've had Raza writers. But La Raza was silenced.
 They systematically excluded us: the U.S.

History books said nothing about Chicanao Power,
 of high school kids organizing walkouts throughout the Southwest in protest, demanding
 better treatment, better teachers, better classes, better resources, better books
 college students like David Sánchez, Ralph Ramírez, Carlos Móntez and
 el **Movimiento Estudiantil Chicanao de Aztlán**
 or the landmark lawsuit after the Lemon Grove Incident of 1931
 the landmark case of *Pedro (Pete) Hernandez v. State of Texas* (1954)
 how on April 22, 1970 Mario Solis and the Diego community reclaimed Chicano Park
 about Rubén Salazar and August 29th, 1970
 Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales and the Crusade for Justice in Denver
 King Tiger, Reies López Tijerina, bringing judgment day to Tierra Amarilla
 the political powerhouse José Angel Gutiérrez and La Raza Unida Party...

nothing.

I was taught we had nothing and nobody.

I was taught we were going to be nothing and nobody,
 that we were *A-political* *A-historical* *A-pathetic*...

lessons learned.

I stand and listen to the graduating Hispanics of the Class of 2000 quietly curse in unison
 damn.
 damn.
 damn.

Elemental Fragments

Once upon a time
 Love was there;
 should I envy my carnalote?
I should pity my carnalito...

 ...su amor, Apá,
es like a godforsaken sun
 que quema it burns
 even as it fades away...

 ...I'm almost a man;
 I was raised by a woman.
 I've learned to hate men,
I must unlearn to hate women.

Flor y Canto

Tocayo wore down Lincoln Logs-like pencils to shavings writing a seemingly nonsensical phrase *in Xochitl in Cuicatl* over and over all over and around the chips of wood embedded in the crude kindergarten paper. He gave each spiral added depth, each letter character, each word a breath of life. He arranged the words in slim columns and hummed the mysterious rhythm he heard in them. Tocayo knew their music as well as he knew the beauty of their spell.

It came easy to Tocayo. He was to be nurtured by flower and by song. His mother, Mrs. Rosas, was a beautiful first grade (my first crush) teacher. She read him poetry—lullabies—by Coyote en Ayunas, Guillermo Carlos Guillemos, Neftalí Reyes Basoalto. His father, don Filemón, was a filósofo y músico y supervisor at El Quinto Sol Market and daily serenaded his son y señora.

It came easy to Tocayo, because he came from the womb of a flower and blossomed to the warmth of song. “I write what I know, you know. And what I know is who made me; that’s who I am—that’s what *this* is,” he says with a radiant smile while writing a Love lyric.

second crush

(Mimi)

Because I was illiterate,
I couldn't quietly write poems about míAmor,
couldn't let my Love live forever on the page;
I *had* to tell my second grade microcosm.

Though, only Dioscito heard those poemas
(mís planes) en mí corazoncito
—lusting for a happily-ever-after Love—
cuz I was more or less voiceless; they say

something like a dove kissed my lips and left me
mute. My brown eyes had to speak to
míAmor, who understood, who said no to me
as she quietly dug a hole in our class garden.

My dumb voice finally flew back to me in fifth,
the year míAmor's hair fell. The same year
I said no to her. That spring
our class planted a sapling, un manzanito.

El Barrio on the North End

On the east side of that barrio was the cemetery,
 and on the west the city dump. And fallow fields
 or plots of gone-bad onions took up the open space.
 That barrio was enclosed by deep dirt ditches
 and dried up concrete canals working a whole lifetime,
 harvesting la perennial pisca de plastico...but also
 the three-year-old's shoe clinging on to the steep bank,
 the piece of shirt collar caught on the floodgate blade.

I remember the war we waged on
 the rattlesnake we jumped and skinned and hanged
 on a low tree limb for all to see
 how cold-blooded we felt.
 A hummingbird thirstily drank from the naked flesh.
 ElGato limped over and slashed off the long rattle—
 the blood and venom joined the other spots on the sidewalk.
 DonTémoc, el escribano y cuentista, came out with his cane,
 shaking his head as always, and took down the flayed body.

Two surcos slithered and cut between apartment buildings.
 We played tackle football in the trenches
 —sloshing through backwater—
 as the older vatos watched on.
 They scouted talent amid the muck and grime.
 Y ya traían bronca
 from home school hace un chingo
 and they'd argue with fileros or lechugeros in hand;
 ready to protect their reps,
 ready to recall all the rage and hate in their hearts
 and pour it down the guts of the twin gutters.

The type of vatos I grew up around

The real hard Vato woke up on the weekend to do the entire wash,
but only after making breakfast for three
using whatever he could find in the fridge—
an egg, meat bologna, some spuds, stale ends of white bread—
y toda la manteca, sal, Consomé, and pimienta needed
to give that capirotada flavor.

The real down Vato let his carnalito drink a full sippy cup of Tampico
on the multi-stained loveseat sofa and watch LooneyTunes a while longer
while he separated las garras into piles,
all the while making the middle child scrub the toilet clean.

The real tough Vato bumped gangsta rap tunes out of a clean-machín stereo system
and had the chapulín follow him with the dustpan as he swept the entire apartment,
occasionally checking on the middle child to make sure the mop bucket was being prepared
properly and promptly; and supervised as that child gave the linoleum three run-throughs—
dos con Cloro y la última pasada con PinoSol or Fabuloso!
They had memorized it like a rosary. Simón,
el Vato perrón recited raps about police brutality
while folding a heap of just-out-of-the-dryer shirts and tramos
—a warm womb to the burrowing criatura.

The real dangerous Vato looked down or away and said nothing
when his single-parent Chicana jefa got home from el jale—
got on his case, got in his face, screaming and scolding,
complaining about work the apartment *esta PINCHI vida.*

Religion

in the closet, on a hanger all to itself
and separate from the other starch-crisp clothes,
la Virgen de Guadalupe hovers
on the front of a meticulously ironed shirt.

el Chicanito kneels and whispers the act of contrition
to this mythological Mother
 when night comes,
 when he feels chills of fear
 nibbling away at his heart's heat,
 when he wakes.
his sibilant prayers are a suspended shush
that rise to the skyscape like sighs.

la imagen de la Mestiza
is a cholo's black-and-white rendering.
thru down-tilted lashes, She offers downcast eyes.
 has She always shrugged Her shoulders?

The need for love oldies in the north-end barrio

Out in the north-end barrio, during summer, we cautiously snuck out of Section 8 housing units, sly as the first star in the late afternoon sky.

And soon the boys became the gangly shadows to the girls as the two groups strolled around the apartment buildings until the sound of cicadas harmonized with the humming of electric currents and the ghostly orange halo of streetlamps hovered over street corners.

Throughout the day, the surrounding dompe spread its noxious incense; and so, we waited for the midnight breeze, the bringer of a breath of fresh air.

Stars rained down their dust clouds and casted love spells on stargazers as tweens gathered outside Oldschool's pad, the one blaring love oldies that said it all...and then all a puppy-love-struck pair had to do was blink away troubles and blend into the background, into a jagged rincocito.

Then, it was easy to endure or dismiss the oppressive heat and toxic setting, and to search out and be swallowed by the smoldering shadows of the barrio.

Chicanadas

When Chicharrón's troquita wouldn't turn on, it was a chicanada that eventually made the battery terminals squeeze juice out of a used, lemon-soaked car battery. (We went to cut grass on the rich side of town without ever turning the truck off.) It was another chicanada that made the truck come to a complete stop, cuz we were riding tortilla-thin break pads. Y a lo mejor our tensed muscles—bracing for the putazo—and curse-prayers through gritted teeth helped, but the bike tires tied to the bumpers got the job done.

And it was a chicanada when Chavo's dad asked me to climb and tie the piñata rope end to the cable antenna on the roof. Every maíztro at the party was too hurt from work or too drunk to step up to be the roof piñata puller. Some belligerent borrachos *tried* to climb up, but the bunch ended up fumbling and tumbling like a crew of Capulinas, y las doñas had to step in and tend to their wounded viejos.

...Y agüevo que al Manos se le safó the broomstick-turned-piñata club (another chicanada), and the heavy Mexican broom handle hit the antenna, knocking it loose, making it crash down onto the hood of el nino's car, el compadre who had misspent the ¡VOLO! ¡VOLO! money on a few more cases of "NahturruLie." It was then that the poor Mickey Mouse effigy fell to the floor, where the stalking mocosos and escuintles with salivating, jagged cavity-riddled canines and sickle fingers pounced at once—interested only in the contents of the intestines. Within seconds they shredded that trademark rip off into confetti.

When Trompas got the call from Lara that Xochitl Flores was interested in taking a walk around the dark side of the north-end barrio apartment buildings where the blushing moon dared not disrupt lovers, Trompas had 15 minutes—plenty of time for a few chicanadas—to look and smell chiquiz-nice for the firme jainita. While he took a showerazo, le hice el paro of shining his shoes using ThreeFlowers. With no clean chones in sight, he flipped his boxers inside out and saturated the crotch-crack spot with deodorant spray. We quickly gargled big gulps of Avon cologne, and with that aftertaste of alcohol in our mouths, rushed out into the darkness where love at first sight was definitely a chicanada.

How I became a people of The Desert

.

I read that some of our ancestors were the People of the Sun before our ancestors migrated to our Southwest deserts, their ancestral home.

..

We trail-blazed thru abandoned fields of sun-beaten, gone-bad onions to get to grammar school. Later, in jr. high, we walked in the street, beside fallow fields, to keep our creased clothes and calcos clean.

Our brilliantined heads burned a black blaze, while our cholo-wear of ash-grays or dark shades attracted heat—made us police prey.

All the while the wrathful sun was all around, regañandonos Dios sabe por qué, coming down on us, bouncing off the asphalt ground to stare us down—straight in our downbeat faces—all the way home.

...

I pieced together that some parientes lived in Tejas till Repatriation... that Tata was a Bracero and picked el Valle to create a permanent home.

The importance of a (sobres)nombre

I never got a sobrenombre in any of the barrios.
I wanted one real bad. I wanted to be Magic,
“A toda madre o un desmadre,” like in *Blood In,*
Blood Out. But I performed disappearing acts
when older vatos rumbled (often contra primos),
often leaving someone dusted in the loose dirt
between el camposanto and el dompe. I American
Dreamt being Scarface, or Olmos in *American Me*,
but secretly feared having to fulfill either fate:
of going-out guns blazing, that of being a pinto
leader, martyred by backstabbing raza. Maybe
that’s why the older vatos never gave me an apodo.

I was nobody : I was a wannabe. I was just Me.

Shades of Brown

Indio

Indio was a tough, dark-skinned dude with dense huesos and taut muscles. And Indio was Indio decades after the glory days of the Chicano Power Movement when, again, it was NOT a good thing to be called indio in the barrio—unless, that is, referring to that calote Azteca vato carrying that firme, half-naked jainita depicted on the covers of give-away carnicería calendars or found air-brushed, hovering, on the hoods of lowriders.

Teresa's father was un jíndu to the stoop labor and raza in Brole. He married a campesina and made his home right outside that city. Teresa and her younger brothers preferred to use their mother's maiden name cuz in the segregated schools of Brawley the other Chicanao children made fun of the Singhs.

Güero

Güero is from Guanajuato. Tall, blond, blue-eyed, and white-skinned, Anglos would ask him for directions or for the library's business hours and he would answer ¿¡Qué!?! with a Mexican facial expression. And cops never stopped us when Güero was around. Placas must have thought he was an Anglo Big Brother volunteer keeping an eye on us Chicanitos, supervising us.

HueroFelix came from the only White Anglo family in the proyectos. (But Huero would later develop the double accent like other Chicanos.) On Sundays, before going to church with Negro's family and praying to San Patricio, he would join the family for breakfast, and HueroFelix would waste no time in digging into the plate of pinto beans and chorizo-con-huevo. Negro's Nana would hover over him, lovingly stroking his blond locks and saying, *Cómase su huevito, mi huerito*.

Negro

Negro is not black—not even during the 8 months of summer in the sun-baked Valley. But Negro is a few shades browner than most of us. Negro's tatarabuela was Tarahumara and bisabuelo was Black, and maybe this explains his skin color. Negro loves choles, roasts franks on a fork for brunch, and makes duritos y Doritos dance in chile y limón; he prays and curses in Spanglish; and tells the best Pepito jokes.

Prieta is dark. Prieta is dark-dark. Her family came from Honduras & El Salvador, y hechaban de madres y hasta chispas if a neighbor, whenever scolding her, would call her negra. Pobre Prieta, she must have been the first of the Chicanitas on that barb-wire line, living between danger and love, feeling the limits of love and choice in the barrio, growing sabia—trucha!

Chino

Chino from Calipatria is a BIG Chicano with sleek, jet-black hair and tight slits for eyes whenever he smiles or laughs. He is second-generation because his TataCleofas, an Indian from here, was repatriated to Mexico in the 1930s. Accustomed to being kicked out, TataCleofas didn't make a fuss and instead found a nice pueblito in Nayarit to settle in.

China from Calexico was a fourth-generation ChineseMexican in Mexicali. Her family roots there dated back to the late 1800s. Arregló papeles and she and her parents became "naturalized." She is more MEXICAN MEXICAN than some other Chicanaos, born here, who claim to be *¡100% Mejicano!*

The border (fence)

The border was beautiful
when it was bare desert darkened by dusk or dew;

or, in town, an old Ford's pickup truck hood
—propped up like a door\\like a canvas—

covered in blood-rust blotches and scarlet splatter;
beautiful and bare when it suddenly became

a backyard fence of nopales
offering prickly pears and hooked spines.

On A Street

On A Street,

between the Adelante and College View corner stores,
high school schoolboys and schoolgirls,
ditchers and dropouts, winos and veteranos
come together and hold communion during lunch hour.

Crews of as many as thirteen cholos
eat out of one Flamin' Hot Cheetos bag;
they huff and puff cuz
the lemon-soaked, chili-powdered chips
sting the canker sores inside their lips.

Pale-powdered babydolls off to the side
pretend not to be hungry,
apply make up to cover up
dry spots and day-old bruises,
pluck eyebrows like pious penitentes.

Caguama in hand and lawnmower in tow,
CuateCuete sings broken-hearted ballads
and bows after breathing his blues into the bottle;
Cuate is respected—somehow a success story
after a life sentence of self-condemnation.

TresHuelgas softly sways on a fixed spot—
a veterano-of-La-Causa-turned-tecato,
el movimiento in 'em is different now—
as he spews a medi+sin-induced soapbox sermon
in an attempt to unionize a deaf-mute community.

La Placa drive by
and shoot out of a P.A. system
MOVE IT ALONG & DISPERSE AT ONCE,
it is illegal for La Raza to peacefully assemble
in a town of brown majority.

La Migra swoop by with accusing cold stares,
flashing heat, flashing BEWARES
from behind their shiny badges and bikes,
mirror glasses, and stainless steel guns.

LaloGee rebelliously strums his cuatro guitar, y se la rifa:
*From Niland to Calxico,
La Migra's runnin' around;
upsettin', setting up, upsettin' the town,
harassing the shades of brown.*

La Gente still grows nervous on A St.
cuz there's that well-founded fear of the INS
doing whatever the fuck it wants to
no importa if you come from Californios
and pronounce your surname *Rod-REE-Guess*.

This is for La Raza

Low riders tiran el rol por los barrios
in any ranita from hatchback to econoline
with popped out tires & golden spokes,

bumping the system—
 cracking the creativity-stifling concrete,
 shaking the shanties and chantes,
yanking the ears of youngsters—

blaring Brown Pride's "On a Friday Nite,"
or other HipHop rolas like "Brown to the Bone,"
"Latin Active," and the anthem, "La Raza."

Daily, they get pulled over by placas
and ticketed for disturbing the peace.
Their sound and boom is silenced.
Our oom boom ba-boom is banned.

On A Street, Bartola Is Heard, Protesting

Brown Woman

with that makeup on,
 how many “shades of disgrace”
 do you wish to efface when
 you apply that Madre Perla\\light-tone powder
 freely to your face?

Do you see,

do you see how that makeup cuts
 a sickle crescent across your neck,
 an ear-to-ear cosmetic rope burn?
 Is that makeup self-imposed
 (21st century) lynching?

I mean,

do you see your cinnamon-colored skin as a sin?
 Cuz it seems
 you see every trace of your cosmic race as a blemish.

You wear that mask;

you lie and hide:
 you slide bright blue contacts on—
 Do you see?
 Do you see yourself?
 Do you see yourself better?—
 you bleach greñas blond,
 you stay away from the rays of the sun,
 you love white\\light-skinned
 may-be babies maybe more or for
 that skin color you adore.

Or,

do you use that makeup
 to make up
 for
 made-up (innocent?)
 white lies?

In other words,
do you do it to survive
 like La Raza did in the mid-19th century
 after the Mexican\\American War
when this became the U.S. &
 to be a darker shade of brown
 meant second-class citizenship?

You should know this, though;
it's up to you, you know?
 You could easily be La Santa, la Enmascarada de Plata,
 ready for La Lucha or
 la Supcomandanta,
wearing that revolutionary mask, in revolt for justicia social!

Y si se puede...
pos entonces órale,
 Brown Woman with that makeup on,
 túmbate ese rollo racista,
that makeup mentality
 that keeps you down.
Stop buying it,
 applying it,
 piling it by the pound.
Can't you see,
 don't you know,
 can't you FEEL
It weighs you down.
 Pick up on this: Love & Love&Love &
 be the many shades of brown,
be your beautiful self,
 Mestiza.

love

(for the women who wanted to Love this Chicano)

1.

Socorro was sweet sixteen
when she stood up to her jefe—
flipped the bird and flew the coop.

She swore Sal was the one;
and after that cherry popper took her,
there was no going back.

That son-of-a-gun Sal took her far away—
far from her machista father—
into the know-no-one Imperial Valley desert

where he left Socorro
after bare-knuckle beatings, drunk love-
making, three kids.

2.

Chuco & Jackie
got Rudy arrested.

Rudy was in his backyard hitting the weights hard
—his carnalito was keeping track of the sets and reps—

when we all heard Chuco & Jackie
going at it again: fussing and fighting.

Their small apartment was an ill-omened cloud.
The thunderclap it boomed

sent shivers down the adjoining apartments'
spine of Bible-sheet-thin walls.

And it was hot, it was humid, and it was Sunday,
Chuyito was wailing, Joe Bataan was on loud & proud, when

Rudy jumped his yarda's short chain-linked fence,
crossed the dirt callejón, went into their cantón, and

fucked Chuco up—pero gacho!
Se hizo un pedote, y la placa took Rudy.

Later that same day, Chuco & Jackie went at it:
and *oh, baby* they couldn't stop telling *God* how good love felt.

3.

Chuy and Mary are more than friends.
I know
cuz Chuy's nostrils flare up
and he starts breathing hard like a racehorse
whenever Mary meanders,
like a broodmare in heat,
his way.

And of course, cuz Rosie told me
that for the past six weeks
they've used her absentee roomie's room;
and because her plumber's friend found
a wad of Trojans
was the problem with her toilet.

Pobre Pepe.
Pobre pendejo del Pepe.
He's as distracted as a workhorse:
busy moonlighting, busy planning the wedding, busy
dreaming about the honeymoon.

Cora

It's known that a hummingbird is sacred.
It's known that a hummingbird is a thorned heart.

It's known that a hummingbird on the left represents war.
It's known that a hummingbird guides the dead.

La Gente forgets that
we have worshiped a warring heart for centuries.

Coatlicue : Matriarch, Mother, Malinche

Matriarch

Luz

Quinceñera princess
Dons a pañuelo diadem
Soaked with the salt of the earth.
Her feet planted deep
Down irrigated furrows,
She swings rusty lechuguero
And severs icy lettuce heads;
Stops briefly to face the frosty breeze,
Welcomes the morning sun—mirror
That borrows light from her brown eyes to
Blanket & bronze el Valle's stoop labor.

Alex

Queen trannie, lesbianic transsexual,
Your wig is an iridescent headdress,
Your skirt has a serpent,
Your lips shed rivers of blood
Down high school locker room drains.
With gold charm of Christ on breast &
Hummingbird tattoo on left shoulder blade
You stroll down intolerant border towns,
Down god-forsaken, gang-riddled barrios.
Loud and proud and claiming to be
A natural creation.

Mother

Lupe

First to say she's a mother of two—
A high-honors high school senior and
A hyper, ADD, second grade gremlin.
Married to a white-collar macho.
Herself an overworked, underpaid white-collar
Who makes time to make homemade meals most days,
Who packs PB&Js and wraps tacos de choles in foil,
Uses used minivan for work and soccer mom duties,
Tends backyard cornstalks and organic grapevines,
Paints portraits of empowered Chicana Guadalupanas
Si se puede. In her spare time,
Cries over Lupita going off to college.

Maria

Middle-aged, warped-hip woman.
How quickly your boys became baggage.
(*They'll grow to be men and leave.*) Now
How you long for the lustful ojos y piropos
Blue-collars hollered at you once upon a time.
How men continued to stare, even after Junior,
As you pushed the stroller, making your way
To Safeway for powdered milk and Pampers.
But now how can a man lust for a mother-
Of-three, for a baby-bearing battered body?
Can a mother-of-three ever find love?
What a horrible sacrifice—
That of being a single-parent mother-of-three.

Malinche

Eva

Her sable eyes are obsidian mirrors.
A golden-brown border town mestiza beauty
Who, since her quince, daily crosses la línea
To look for Love in smoky barras.
Among stoned men, hard-hearted, pisteando
Just like her father who loved to drink, to cry.
High school senior who already knows
The tequila burn of being a lovechaser,
The aches of punch-drunk broken-heartedness,
The blaze of tears from throbbing black eyes.

Magda

You're a mother-of-too-many.
And so, a mother to none, really.
You got knocked up and dropped out.
They call you La Lil' Medusa
—hija de La Chingona del Eastside—
Cuz you've seduced many machistas.
You know about half-truths and abuse,
So you make men pay child support.
You play the game of love with hateful men;
Turn trickle of tears into rivers;
Chip\\hearts\\into sharp obsidian.
Without knowing,
Hardened your woman heart into stone.

The Chicanito said, "Go ahead and kill us, we're already dead."

On the bottom shelf of the Juvenile,
I found *Pocho* and *Always Running*,
both recent arrivals.

The publication pages of *Pocho* read '59.
Richard Rubio would not make it past '45.
What stays in my mind is the mutilated

Chava with bulging purple scars running,
hacking\\his head
into an incomplete rompecabezas.

Chava, a weeping lost soul,
limping while leading his progeny
down the asphalt rivers of the mean streets.

Aztlán

Aztlán was a run-down hotel on Main Street
my tío and I used to walk by, back when I was a chapulín,
on our way to El Quinto Sol to buy tortillas & tall boys.
He never said, but the whitewashed words on its side wall read CHICANO LOVE.

TresHuelgas told me that in the early 70s
when it changed owners and its name from Su Casa Motel,
the PD station relocated right across the street from it.
Originally, the city's books say, it was named Hacienda Inn.

Aztlán burnt down last year;
some say the new owners did it for the money.
The city cleaned up the rubble de volada, though;
did such a thorough jale, it's as if the 99¢ & cell phone stores are historical sites.

Broken Mirror : IN LAK'ECH

(where you from?)

You come from sticks and stones and *Broken Bones*,
 from broken homes, single-parent pads, falling-apart
 apartments with unstable foundations,
 praying,
 re-reciting, like a broken record, the soul-saving PadreNuestro
 to broken-spirited crucified Christ hanging
 on the Bible-sheet-thin wall,
 or broken-hymen Virgen votive candle bleeding
 red wax out of heat cracks onto empty refrigerator

You come from broken backgrounds,
 trying to piece together fragments of left-out histories and forgotten mythologies,
 trying to recall short-lived ecstasies from an ensemble of rompecabezas psyches—
 the life-shards of latchkey kids, the memories of broken-hearted homeless homeboys

You come from this-ain't-no-joke broke, nickeling dimes times
 that add up to a dime-a-dozen daze in those no-hay-quebrada barrios
 where La Gente work, they work and work to survive but they die,
 they die flat-broke, they died owing, they're dead
 working their spirits to the bone
 in non-union nine-to-fives that got them paying dues,
 redwhite&blue-collar pay got them living those wickedwicked lay-a-buey ways,
 forever struggling to make ends meet, to make sense of dollar-hungry humanity

You come from them broken-English old-timers with furrowed faces and cut up hands
 hell-bent on holding up shattered AmericanDreams

You come from the gray ashes, from the aftermath of a razed Aztlán,
 where the only thing you can count on is the black-and-white nightmare of Broken Dreams

We come from broken mirrors, Broken Mirror
 I'm trying to break that down,
 but who can peace ourselves together?
 LA RAZA Unida jamás será vencida...?
 How do we go from broken mirrors to Holy Wo-Men?
 When do we become tézcatl nécuc xapo again?

What TresHuelgas says (about unions and unity)

IVC, the one and only real college in the entire Valley, doesn't have a MEChA chapter. TresHuelgas insists that it did—that even high schools, once upon a time, had MEChA banners hanging on cross beams; and that students and merchants of labor carried MEChA flags alongside Virgen de Guadalupe artwork during boycotts, pickets, and hunger strikes.

When César passed in '93, TresHuelgas says, all those banners and flags were flown at half-staff...then taken down quickly and put away, never to be raised high again in the Valley.

TresHuelgas' clenched fists seem to grip a heavy carga whenever he remembers aloud. The tattoos on the ditches of his arms glow crimson like teary suns. The poised MEChA eagle on his right, and the UFW flag on his left—the track marks there like poisoned field furrows.

Cut-Throat\\\Job opportunity in el Valle

“It’s cut-throat; they say el Valle has the highest unemployment in the nation, ey.”

–a cliché en Brole

in el Valle
 if you have condition
 if you can run for tres o cuatro files
 without stopping &
 if you can point
 aim
 shoot a cuete
 at somebody at someone
 who looks like Tocayo
 or Cuate
 you
 have a job

you can be
 a cop
 cholo
 border patrolperson
 coyote
 jailer
 narco
 probation officer
 malandrín
 or *Be All You Can Be*
 in the US Army

though you can also go to IVC
 to be an RN &
 earn job security tending to the hurt
 wounded
 dying
 as La Gente come in from a hard day at work

Migrant Workers

Our neighbors on the eastside woke up early
and faced the frosty shadows of industrial-gray
walls with barred windows pulling in slits of sunlight
from the south, where the water-tower cholo-leans above
sloping fertile fields a hundred feet below sea level.

It was five of them living in the two-bedroom. At the time,
I was a carefree chavalito and didn't understand their sacrifice,
or why and some East Side cagapalos gave them a hard time.
But they lived together to gather strength for their cause,
cuz, they said, in unison, *La unión hace la fuerza*.

In the mornings, their carcancha struggled to stay alive.
While it warmed up, they instinctively huddled,
hugged their hoodies, and slouched to center the weight
of heavy packs. They talked about the same old
placazos on brick walls, freshly tagged
on top of crossed-out sobrenombres:

Shadow
Casper
Spooks
El Fanta
Ghost
Con Safos.

They looked at each other and tried to spot resentment
gathering at the bridge of furrowed brows, or anger
billowing from ears, escaping gritted teeth, or weariness
chipping away at the shoulders, sculpting...doubt?
They grumbled, cursed the ritual

Chingado!

..la verga, cabrón, 'inchis güevos 'tan congelados!

No mames..

Todavía ando PEDO, güey.

LessGo!

The primer-splotched Geo Metro rode low
as all five followed the morning star west,
across acres of irrigated fields to get to IVC. Two years
later, they transferred—followed the black highway north
to where four-year colleges exist, outside of este hoyo.

Going to College

When my father was nine, strangers tell me, his mother knocked out his father then hit the road, traveled a thousand miles north with her kids in tow. In the border town of Tijuana, my father kicked up dust with his bare feet as he walked behind his mother and teenage sisters.

A year later, donPancho found them and took my father back to Nayarit.

They say my father was seventeen when he punched out donPancho and took off to find his family. He wandered the streets of the city *descalzo por dos semanas!* When he found them, his hermanas informed him he was two weeks too late. They say, that as a kid, I resembled the late Consuelo, “doñaChelo”—*que en paz descanse.*

In fourth grade, the Family Court granted my jefa full custody. For a full year my father threatened, he would kidnap me and then move to México—*lejos, DEEP, to Nayarit!*

He’s here at graduation, on the outskirts of the overly-celebratory raza crowd, thumbing a greeting card and tracing patterns in the dirt with his eyes. His brilliantined hat hair and clean-shaven look make him look years younger. It’s almost a familiar face. We shake hands solidly and twitch a couple of silent smiles at each other.

In broken Spanish I tell him about a colegio hundreds of miles away.

*Shades of Brown: Thoughts of A Young Mexican American Chicano*Glossary & Commentary

Part of the title came to me more than ten years ago when I was a junior in high school. Back then I wrote a couple of pieces I thought were the beginning of this book and would *HAF*TA be included. (They're not.) And like those early pieces, these that made it to this draft are intended for La Raza/La Gente/The People.

In a real sense, this book is a collaborative work because it contains communal stories. It contains the cacophony of my community's muted voices and the shared moments of harmony between my music and my community's humanity.

I'm aware that some of the pieces in this manuscript will not be uplifting, but, Raza, take from this offering only what will give you scales and feathers.

“Dedication”

The Dedication includes my mixed feelings and the mixture of people that have shaped me, my mentality, and now this book.

“A Quick Quihúbole”

Quihúbole – ¿Qué hubo? ¿Qué onda? Q-vo

This is the preface; and of course, the quihúbole includes an ever so subtle smile and chin nudge.

“Miseducation”

Santos – El Santo, Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta

TinTan – Tin-Tan, Germán Valdés

Mitote – chisme

Caló – a Chicanao dialect

Pinto – prisoner, convict

Brole – Brawley, Califas

Chicali – Mexicali, Baja Califas

It was dangerous being born Chicano; I was taught hate (to hate everyone, and to hate every one of my racial and cultural facets) every day, and by seemingly countless persons and social institutions. That's why I believe the most important thing a Chicano Studies class (in college, where they're offered) has to offer is the teaching of LOVE—teaching Love for the self & our culture, which reinforces our mestizo (global/cosmic) humanity. ...I know, I know—the list leaves out countless awesome writers. I wanted to name a few Chicanos y Chicanas that wrote and published prior to the mid-1980s. Pero no se agüiten, write me an email (ShadesOfBrown.Thoughts@gmail.com) and let me know who I HAFTA add to the list for the next draft. ... Q-vo to J.A. Gutiérrez and “22 Miles”.

“Elemental Fragments”

Summaries and fragments can leave so much out...and so does a young, broken-hearted mind.

“Flor y Canto”

In xochitl in cuicatl – Nahuatl, figurative phrase for poetry; the literal Spanish translation is “flor y canto”; “flor y canto” is used by Chicanos to refer to poetry.

“second crush”

All love poems owe something to Noemí (Mimi).

“El Barrio on the North End”

Bronca – pedo, beef, animosity
 From hace un chingo – from a long time ago
 Fileros – blades, shivs, shanks
 Lechugeros – knives used to cut lechugas

Not every vato in the barrio is a cholo or is gang related, but in this barrio, as in other barrios in my city (I dare say the entire Valley?), most Chicanitos y Chicanitas inescapably witnessed violence of some sort. Curiously, the temperament of the socio-economic “environment” noticeably influences both La Gente’s view of Nature and La Gente’s general spirituality.

“The type of vatos I grew up around”

Consomé – chicken or beef bouillon powder loaded with MSG

Las garras – la ropa

Clean-machín – chilo, cool, top-notch

Perrón – badass

Tramos – pants

Pinchi – pinche, fucken

Vatos in the barrio had other responsibilities other than being 100% tough guys 100% of the time. In truth (and ironically), it was probably these grown-up responsibilities that drove them to be tough guys.

“Religion”

The childhood image that has stayed in my mind is of a sad-faced/defeated Virgen. I wondered why She was so sad and hopeless-looking if She was, after all, a god—“The God” to most Mexicanos and Chicanaos.

“The need for love oldies in the north-end barrio”

Those oldies but goodies remind me...that music can be so seductive—an opiate for the masses.

“Chicanadas”

Troquita – little truck

Putazo – hit, chingazo

Maíztro – maestro, wise one, old dude or middle-ager

Mocosos and Escuintles – morritos, chavalitos, little kids, plebes

Firme – all-around good, de aqellas, good-looking

Paro – favor

Chones – chonis, calzones, calzoncillos

The word Chicanada had a negative connotation back home. It wasn't as bad as “chicanery,” but since it denoted a poor-man's solution—often a poor man's quick-fix—it was loaded with

cheerful negativity. Often times the term was applied to unsound and/or unsafe solutions. Pero Chicanadas hacian el paro; often dejaban algo a toda máquina. Chicanadas proved La Raza was resourceful and able to get a job done with the limited resources that were available.

“How I became a people of The Desert”

Cholo-wear made it extremely challenging to appreciate the sun in The Desert.

“The importance of a (sobres)nombre”

A toda madre – everything good

Desmadre – disaster, violent chaos

A toda madre o un desmadre – everything all-good, or everything all-bad

Imagine if someone gave you an apodo like Shadow, Casper, Sad Girl, or Puppet—how would this naming ritual remind you of your identity? How would it shape your identity? How would this influence your concept of destiny or fate? In what ways would it motivate or inspire you?

“Shades of Brown”

Calote – ripped, cut up, buff, muscular

Jíndu – hindú

Placas – cops

Y hechaban de madres y hasta chispas – they would curse and get pissed off

Trucha – sharp, aguzada

The Chicanao mestizaje is very complex. Apodos can sometimes reflect this complexity. ...

Q-vo to el maestro Mario Suárez and “El Hoyo.”

“The border (fence)”

When I was a little-little kid, we (la fam) would cross the border occasionally. In Calexico, often times había cola to get into Mexicali, and as the car got within a hundred feet from the checkpoint, I would be able to look out the window and see about half a mile of crudely

constructed border fence. The soil, on the other hand, was this beautiful dark brown that included chocolatey reds that made the tufts of grass and weeds shine even greener. There, the rust and mud scuff marks on miscellaneous metal, the opaque concrete structures, the clear blue country sky with intoxicating wood smoke breezes, the brown chickens clucking next to the green nopales with blood-orange tunas all made the border a blend of beautiful to me.

“On A Street”

Babydolls – cute girls
Caguama – 32-ouncer
Medi+sin – “medicine,” heroin

La Gente would naturally gather around a G(ente)-spot and eat lunch together. Since most of the time most of us were broke, lunch afforded us the time to get together to joke around, talk about the tragedy of the day before, and spread the daily chisme. ... Q-vo to el maestro Mario Suárez and “Señor Garza.” Q-vo to Bob Marley & the Wailers and the song “Mr. Brown.”

“This is for La Raza”

Ranita – lowered ranfla
Chante – house
“Brown to the Bone” – song by Knightowl
“Latin Active” – song by Lighter Shade of Brown ft. Teardrop and Shiro
“La Raza” – song by Kid Frost

I’m one of those who felt that after César Chávez there were no high-profile Chicanao role models for Chicanit@s. But La Gente leaders have always been there, trying to organize and mobilize, trying to be heard. ... Q-vo to Amiri Baraka (a.k.a. LeRoi Jones) and “Wise 1.”

“On A Street, Bartola Is Heard, Protesting”

Madre Perla – the bleach cream
Greñas – pelos, cabello
May-be baby – baby whose daddy ‘may be this guy, or may be that guy’
Túmbate ese rollo – get rid of that mentality/attitude/onda

In junior high jainitas started to powder their faces with light-tone powder makeup. (This was in the early 90s, and Chicanitas have reminded me that the cosmetic companies did not really cater to all the shades of brown—white-tone powder was, for the most part, the only shade available.) The girls would pile on the powder all over their faces and under their chins. Chicanitas that were güeritas were more likely to pull off the blend (the optical illusion). But on most Chicanitas you could easily see the bulgy, ear-to-ear powder border. In whatever case, the makeup demarcated that thin line between love and self-hate; it was a very real border. ... Q-vo to Miguel Piñero and “Black Woman with the Blond Wig On.”

“love (*for the women who have wanted to Love this Chicanito*)”

Cantón – house, home
 Pero gacho – really bad
 Pedote – big problem

I don’t know if it’s the telenovelas or the chisme that leaves an everlasting depressing impression of Love. But I do know of some of the harmful consequences of defining Love in negative terms for oneself. If Love = pain, then get ready cuz that lie will yield a lifetime of sufrimientos. ... Q-vo to Joe Bataan and the songs “My Cloud” and “Mestizo.”

“Cora”

Cora – corazón

“La Raza tiene un chingo de cora!” To me, the word “cora” is an example of a root word (and, curiously, when I think of ‘root’ I think of ‘corazón/heart’) that contains a dichotomous nature; just as cora could be used by raza to mean ‘courage,’ it could easily denote couRAGE (coraje).

“Coatlicue : Matriarch, Mother, Malinche”

Coatlicue – the representation of Earth and Nature.
 Choles – frijoles
 Piropos – catcalls
 Pisteando – drinking

I wanted to write a piece about Chicanas—something that sounded true to my experience. And although women are not roses, they represent a very real link to Nature (& Love) to growing boys.

“The Chicanito said, ‘Go ahead and kill us, we’re already dead.’”

I remember going to the library and looking for Chicano books. I didn’t want to ask the librarians where I would be able to find such books because I was afraid they would laugh at me. Also, I wasn’t sure what books to ask for; I didn’t have a list of titles or authors. Needless to say, I wasn’t very successful at first; but I found *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* on one of those trips; and soon after, in the same dusty, cramped Juvenile section, the title POCHO! shouted out to me. That was a good start. ... Q-vo to José Antonio Villarreal and Luis J. Rodriguez.

“Aztlán”

Aztlán – the mythological homeland of Chicanaos
Tall boys – tall cans, 24-ounce cans
De volada – with a quickness

If Aztlán has been reduced to ashes, what shrine has been built on top its ruins?

“Broken Mirror : IN LAK’ECH (*where you from?*)”

In lak’ech – Mayan, “you are my other self” or “I am another yourself”

Broken Bones – according to a source, this is a more accurate translation of the Nahuatl phrase used for the title of the English version (*The Broken Spears*) of Miguel León-Portilla’s *Visión de los vencidos*.

Tézcatl nécuc xapo – a mirror pierced on both sides, alludes to the tlachialoni, “a type of scepter with a pierced mirror at one end. This object was part of the equipment of certain gods... Applied to the wise man [tlamatini], it conveys the idea that he is himself a medium of contemplation, ‘a concentrated or focused view of the world and things human.’”
(Miguel León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind*, trans. J.E. Davis)

I remember reading about Smoky Mirror. Three thousand years ago, that vato gave himself the apodo Smoky Mirror shortly after having a spiritual epiphany. He re-named himself so he wouldn’t forget this rediscovered precious knowledge and mythology, so he would remember he was God. I also remember reading that, in a similar way, Raza in the 60s renamed/reclaimed themselves “Chicanaos,” and the Southwest became “Aztlán.” ... Q-vo to Pedro Pietri and “Puerto Rican Obituary.”

“What TresHuelgas says (about unions and unity)”

Carga – heroin (dose)

Ditches – tattoo term., refers to the inside part of the arm, opposite of the elbow

One of MEChA’s responsibilities to the community is to teach La Raza about Chicanao history and culture. If MEChA doesn’t do this, who/what will, right?

“Cut-Throat\\\Job opportunity in el Valle”

Cholo – gang member; also, a poor person or mestizo

Coyote – people smuggler, human trafficker

Narco – drug trafficker

Malandrín – career criminal/delinquent

This dichotomous career list was (is?) a very real reality for a lot of us. When I was young, it seemed to me that if you were not a peace officer, you were being arrested/detained by one. It felt like the professions that existed for Chicanos in the Valley were very limited, and that they all involved violence of some sort. Needless to say, some Gente preferred to be unemployed. IVC, by the way, is really well known for its nursing program/major.

“Migrant Workers”

Cagalpos – trouble makers, shit starters

Con/Safos – or “c/s,” almost to mean ‘consecuencia segura,’ crossing out of this placazo comes with serious consequences

Güevos – testicles

Pedo – drunk

Schoolwork is work, and college students are workers. Chicanos y Chicanas in my home valley continue to follow a type of corrido: they have to travel north, leaving their homes and families behind, in order to find education and career opportunity.

“Going to College”

Chicanas y Chicanos pack many things into their minds when they leave home for college.

Bonus/Hidden Tracks:

“My Onda Chicana”

Clecha – school

Cholo – gang member, poor person, mestizo

Chota – cop(s)

Choles – frijoles

Aztlán – the mythological homeland of Chicanaos

When I left my home valley and arrived at the college dorms, one of the first odd-sounding questions people posed to me was: “*What are you?*” What they were asking for was a racial label or a hyphenated nationality. To this day, people still demand from me a pocket size definition of my identity. This piece came from thinking about how best to abridge my identity. ... For an excellent exploration of the Chicanao identity read Luis Valdez’s *Pensamiento Serpentino*. ... Q-vo to Corky and *Yo Soy Joaquín*.

“Writing”

This one came to me during the editing process when I kept asking myself questions about my intended audience. I think my audience is specific. I don’t write stuff for Shakespeare, for example. If Shakespeare ever did pick up my writings, he would need pages and pages of endnotes to appreciate my literary endeavor.

Bonus/Hidden Tracks:

My Onda Chicana

1.

Yo soy Chicano : I'm Chicano :
 a mestizo
 of MeXican descent,
 a SouthWest desert-dwelling American
 from southeast Southern CalifAztlán.

2.

I've endured
 las clechas,
 the churches,
 the cholos,
 los chotas
 with their *SHOW ME YOUR*
 hands on their pistolas
 when they "talk" at
 me 'SKIN.

3.

Soy pocho,
 pachuco,
 Chicano,
 cholo in the U.S.
 —one feels so solo in the U.S.—
 who realized that
 a cholo's only choice
 (in life, ése)
 was to eat choles;
 in the U.S., a
 cholo's only choice is
 being a cholero.

4.

I've endured
 unnatural borders,
 unconstitutional court orders,
bias news reporters,
 media misrepresentations,
 socio-political manipulations,
 coercion\cruel & unusual just-us\hanged heroes,
 enviro-institutional discrimination,
miseducation,
 the fear &
 the rejection
of a xeno-racist motherland
 before & after
 Aztlán.

Writing

When I think about writing
 I think about La Raza/The People
 who *can't afford / Vato, I ain't got time*
 to ponder poetics nor non-elemental metaphors;
 who are busy struggling,
 trying to make sense
 what just happened to them 5, 50, 500 years ago

I think about GOD—
 how the Chicanito carries Him in the heart
 as FEAR;
 how the Chicanito tries to hide from His Wrath
 behind the threadbare rebozo of a sad-faced Virgen

think about El Cucuy and La Llorona:
 the face-less monster who unjustifiably spawns death,
 La Chingada (*that Crazy Bitch*) que no para de chingar

I think about Raza unity in the 21st century—
 where are we now, Raza?
 Up on the hills, like rich or indigenous people?
 Hidden behind heaps of LSAT study guides?
 Hidden behind bars for a 5-to-500 bid

think about Chicanao Love and lore
 made up of lies and chisme,
 day-time divorce court TV, prime-time telenovelas,
 6, 8, 10 o'clock news stressing Brown-on-Brown violence

think about Chicanaos celebrating Cinco de Mayo
 el 16 de Septiembre
 Chicanaos celebrating Mexican heroes
 la Independencia
 Allende Hidalgo y Costilla
 la Revolución
 Zapata Villa
 think about Chicanaos celebrating Thanksgiving
 Fourth of July
 Chicanaos celebrating U.S. heroes

of Independence

Jefferson	Washington	
Memorial Day		
Herrera	Hernández	Rascón
[Silvestre S.	[Rodolfo Pérez	[Alfred
WWII]	Korea]	Vietnam]

I think of the Day of the Dead
 and I don't think about meditating
 on this life and death situation,
 or communicating with the Immortal Soul
 of past particles & past parientes & past poetas

I think about writing
 cuz cholitas y cholitos are down and claim
 Chicanao Love & Mythology are as alive as they are

I think about Alurista talkin bout
Poetry's here too heall
 it's suppose to uplift The People
 from under the heel of oppression
 Poetry is here to heal, Carnal
 Poetry is here to heal, Carnala
 Poetry is here to heal all Raza

y pos pienso en people like myself,
 think about how to create happiness for all of us.