SHADES OF BROWN: THOUGHTS

OF A YOUNG MEXICAN AMERICAN CHICANO

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SHADES OF BROWN: Thoughts of A Young Mexican American Chicano

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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 hear my imperfect lines time after time,
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 my truth, to see yourselves among the 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
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Glossary & Commentary

TresHuelgas says the Truth in Rhythm that moves my muse is mostly Blues.
My Onda Chicana

1.

Yo soy Chicano: I’m Chicano,
   a mestizo
   of Mexicano 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 and unusual, hanged heroes,
environmental & institutional discrimination,
miseducation,
the fear &
the rejection
of a racist motherland
before & after
Aztlán.
Miseducation

Pre-school began by teaching me my native tongue was wrong. The tongue that spoke the Spanglish names of first loves, that rattled off the names of the few but familiar heroes Santos TinTan NanaLupe, that gave the taste of earth a name—tacos de choles! —my native tongue was *Uncouth* *Unacceptable* *Un-American*… But how else could I feel, how else could I say what I needed, 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 this *wrong* education: *my inglés*\|\|*Spanish was wrong; my Pocho*—*wrong; my Caló was something malo...I was wrong!* Every single school day: Chicanaos :: prison :: pintos. Chicanitos and Chicanitas assimilated this hate, and by fourth grade pochos chased ESLers around the yard to teach them English-Only lessons during recess. This went on until junior high where Raza was divided\|\|*ready for the conquest* some of us claimed Brole XIII, some of us rifavamos Chicali XIII. It was then, the when and where actions spoke louder than words, and all we could do was spew the cora from our ulcerous guts. See, by then we were all graduates of this miseducation, and could preach and teach the hurt, we could really hurt maim kill ourselves each other La Raza. Seething self-hatred was at the heart of the barrio warfare that was genocidal suicidal—heartless violence the cholitos prayed to sacrificed for knew it was euthanasia.
At the beginning of the 21st century, 
in 2000, there was no Chicana/o Love mythology being taught. 
The high school black-&-white AmericanLit anthology made it clear: 
I had no writers,  
no mythology makers.  
I had no poets,  
no Truth tellers.  
I had no literary tradition,  
no thoughts, no words, no voice:  
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…  
But La Raza was taught silence. These Raza rebelled. But La Raza was silenced.  
They systematically excluded us: the U.S.  
History books said nothing about Chicana/o 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 Chicana/o de Aztlán  
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 Solís 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…  
Now, looking back at these 17,  
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 amór, 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.
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 said to be born of flower and of 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 Guillermos, Neftalí Reyes Basoalto. His father, donFilemón, was a filósofo y músico y supervisor at El Quinto Sol Market and daily serenaded his son y señora.

Tocayo 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 while writing a Love lyric.
second crush
(Noemí)

Cause I was illiterate,
I couldn’t quietly write poems
about miAmor. I had to tell
my second grade microcosm.

Only Dioscito heard those poemas
(mis planes) en mi coranzoncito
—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
miAmor, who understood, who said no to me
as she quietly dug a hole in our class garden.

My voice finally flew back to me in fifth,
the year miAmor’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... and the three-year-old’s shoe... just... just sticking out the muddy 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 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. DonTémc, el escribano y cuentista, came out with his cane, shaking his head as always, and took down the flayed body.

Twin surcos slithered and cut between apartment buildings. We played tackle football in the trenches—sloshing through backwater—as the older vatos watched on. They looked for talent amid the muck and grime. Ya traían bronca from home school hace un chingo and they’d argue with fileros or lechugueros 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 cartoons 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 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 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. We waited for the cool midnight breeze, bringer of a breath of fresh air.

Stars rained down their dust clouds and casted love spells on us 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 rinconcito.

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. And it was another chicanada that made the truck come to a complete stop, cuz we were riding tortilla-thin break pads. A la 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 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 “NahturrLuie.” It was then that the poor Mickey Mouse effigy fell to the floor where the mocosos and escuintles with salivating, jagged cavity-riddled canines and sickle fingers waited, interested only in the contents of its intestines. Then they were upon it!!!

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 gargled big gulps of Avon cologne. And with that aftertaste of alcohol in our mouths we rushed out into the darkness where love was definitely a chicanada.
How I became a people of The Desert

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

We trail-blazed through fields of sun-beaten, gone-bad onions to get to grammar school. Later, in Jr. high, we walked on the street, beside fallow fields, to keep our clothes and shoes clean.

Our brilliantined heads burned a black blaze. What we wore was agüevo cholo-wear of dark shades of ash-gray, sporting black white whip marks at our feet and midnight-blue cologne & sweat-soaked paños.

The merciless sun was all around—scolding us, regañandonos Dios sabe por qué; coming down on us, bouncing off the asphalt ground to stare us down—straight in the face—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) in battles that often ended 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 Singh.

Güero

Güero was 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 musta 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 of other Chicanas.) Before going off to church and praying to San Patricio, Negro’s Nana would make 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 was not black—not even during the 8 months of summer in the sun-baked Valley. Negro was simply a few shades browner than the rest of us. Negro’s tatarabuelo was Black and his tatarabuela was Tarahumara, and maybe this explained his skin color. Negro loved choles, roasted hotdogs on a fork for brunch, and made churritos/Doritos dance in chile y limón; he prayed and cursed in Spanglish; and told the best Pepito jokes.

Prieta was dark. Prieta was 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 musta 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 was a BIG Chicano with sleek, jet-black hair and tight slits for eyes whenever he smiled or laughed. He was second-generation because his Tata Cleofas, an Indian from here, was repatriated to Mexico in the 1930s. Accustomed to being kicked out, Tata Cleofas didn’t make a fuss and instead found a nice pueblito in Nayarit to settle in.

China from Calexico was a fourth-generation Chinese Mexican in Mexicali. Her family roots there dated back to the late 1800s. Arregló papeles and she and her parents became “naturalized.” She was more MEXICAN MEXICAN than some other Chicanaos, born here, who claimed to be ¡100% Mejicano!
The border was beautiful
when it was just 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;
when the border 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,
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
to teens who look up to him and show respecto
cuz somehow Cuate’s 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 a last attempt to unionize a deaf-mute community.

La Placa drive by
    and shoot out from their loudspeakers
*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 their shiny badges and bikes,
mirror glasses, and stainless steel guns.
LaloGee furiously strums his cuatro guitar y se la rifa:
*From Niland to Calexico*
*La Migra’s runnin’ around;*
*upsettin’, setting up, upsettin’ the town,*
*harassing the shades of brown.*
Still, La Gente 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 are fifth-generation
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 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.
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 who you’re dying to be?—
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, 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,
   tumbate 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 Chicanito)

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, it was Sunday,  
Chuyito was crying, 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 the plumber found  
a wad of Trojans  
was the problem with her toilet.  

Pobre Pepe.  
Pobre pendejo del Pepe.  
He’s as distracted as a workhorse:  
business moonlighting, busy planning the wedding,  
business dreaming about their honeymoon.
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
Into irrigated furrows,
She swings rusty lechuguero
And severs icy lettuce heads;
Stops briefly to face the frosty breeze
And welcome the morning sun—Mirror
That borrows light from her brown eyes to
Blanket & bronze el Valle’s stoop labor.

Alex

Queen trannie,
Your skirt has a serpent;
Your lips shed rivers of blood
Down high school locker room drains.
Head held high, your wig is an iridescent headdress
As you stroll down life’s catwalk of calm & chaos
With gold charm of Christ on breast &
Hummingbird tattoo on left shoulder blade—
Forever knowing
You straddle the line between God-ess,
And with squared shoulders
You stand a-part from man.
Mother

Lupe

Mother of two:
A high-honors high school senior and
A hyper second grade gremlin.
Married to a white-collar macho.
Herself an overworked, underpaid white-collar
Who makes time to prepare three meals most days,
Who packs PB&Js and wraps tacos de choles in foil,
Quien dobla la ropa del tendedero cuando le toca,
Who tends backyard corn stalks and grapevines,
Who uses used minivan for work and soccer mom duties.
She paints portraits of empowered Chicana Guadalupanas
Si se puede.
In her spare time she 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 stroller, making your way
To Safeway for powdered milk and Pampers.
But now, how could 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
Who—hard-hearted—pistean pa’ pelear y chillar
Just like her father who loved to drink.
High school senior who already knows
The bitter burn of lovechaser after tequila,
Aches of punch-drunk broken-heartedness,
And the blaze of tears
From throbbing black eyes.

Magda

You’re a mother-to-too-many.
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 trails 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 stayed in the mind is the mutilated
Chava with bulging purple scars running,
hacking his head and body into pieces.

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 shy Chaplin,
  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.

Tres Huelgas 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 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,
shards of memories so-called lives by them 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 nio 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 crossbeams. And that the merchants of labor carried those 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 be gripping a heavy carga. The tattoos on the ditches of his arms glow like crimson suns. One’s the MEChA eagle, the other is the UFW flag. The track marks there are like poisoned field furrows.
Cut-Throat

Job opportunity in el Valle

“It’s getting 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 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

got a job

you can be
   a cop
   cholo
   border patrolperson
   coyote
   jailer
   narco
   probation officer
   malandrin
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 slits of sunlight
from the south, from the agricultural center of the Valley,
a fertile desert sloping a hundred feet below sea level.

There was five of them living in the two-bedroom.
La neta, at the time, none of us understood their sacrifice,
and some East Side cagapalos gave them a hard time at times.
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 they waited for it to warm up, they instinctively huddled,
hugged their hoodies, and slouched to counter the weight
of their heavy packs. They talked about the same old
placazos on brick walls, freshly tagged
on top of 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
rising from ears, escaping as winged breath, or weariness
chipping away at the shoulders, sculpting…doubt?
They grumbled, cursed the ritual

  Chingado!
  ..la verga, cabrón, 'inchis güevos estan 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.
Then 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, traveling a thousand miles north with her kids in tow. In the border town of Tijuana, my father walked behind his mother and teenage sisters, kicking dirt with his bare feet.

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

They say he 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 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 Méjico—lejos, DEEP, to Nayarit!

He’s here at graduation, on the outskirts of the overly-celebratory Raza crowd, nervously thumbing a greeting card. 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 smiles at each other.

In broken Spanish I tell him about a colegio hundreds of miles away.
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 HAFTA be included. (They’re not.) And like those early pieces, these that made it to this manuscript are intended for La Raza/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 chin nudge and smile.

“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 home for college, one of the first questions people posed in the dorms was: “What are you?” What they were asking for was a racial label or a hyphenated nationality. And to this day, people still demand from me an abridged definition of my identity. This piece came from thinking about my identity. … For an excellent exploration of the Chicanao identity read Luis Valdez’s Pensamiento Serpentino. … Q-vo to Corky and Yo Soy Joaquín.
“Miseducation”

Santos – El Santo, Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta
TinTan – Tin-Tan, Germán Valdés
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 say 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, & humanity. … I know, I know—I left out countless awesome writers. I wanted to
name a few Chicanos y Chicanas that wrote and published prior to the mid-80s. Pero no se
agüiten, write me an email (my email comes up later, keep reading) and let me know who I
HAFTA add on the next draft. … Q-vo to J.A. Gutiérrez and “22 Miles”.

“Elemental Fragments”

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

“Flor y Canto”

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

“second crush”

All love poems are principally dedicated to Noemí (Mimi).
“El Barrio on the North End”

Bronca – pedo, beef, animosity
From hace un chingo – from a long time ago
Fileros – shivs, shanks
Lechugueros – 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 (the Valley?), most Chicanitos y Chicanitas inescapably witnessed violence of some sort. Curiously, the temperament of the socio-economic environment also shaped La Gente’s spirituality and their view of Nature.

“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 Mejicanos 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, old dude or middle-ager
Mocosos and Escuintles – morritos, chavalitos, little kids
Firme – all-around good, de aqellas, good-looking
Paro – favor
Chones – 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

Image 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 shape your destiny / fate / self-realization / motivation?

“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 closer to the border I would be able to see what I remember as a mini-canyon (the size is probably exaggerated by my imagination) whose soil was this beautiful dark brown which included chocolatey reds that made the tufts of grass and weeds shine even greener. 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 Chicano role models for Chicanita@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 the only shade available, for the most part.) The girls would pile on the powder all over their faces and under their chins. On most Chicanitas you could easily see the bulgy, ear-to-ear powder border. Chicanitas that were güeritas were able to blend it better. But in whatever case, the makeup demarcated that thin line between love and 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 negative impression of Love. But I do know of the consequences of defining Love in negative terms for oneself. If Love = pain, then get ready for a lifetime of sufrimientos, tu sabes? … 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 word whose root contains a dichotomous nature—just as it could mean courage, it could mean courRAGE (coraje).
“Coatlicue : Matriarch, Mother, Malinche”

Coatlicue – the representation of Earth and Nature.
Piropos – catcalls

I wanted to write a piece about Chicanas; something that sounded true to my experience.

“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 the books because I afraid they would laugh at me. Also, I wasn’t sure what books to ask for, I didn’t have a list. I started with The Autobiography of Malcolm X and 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”

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 titular phrase Broken Arrows, the Indigenous account of The Spanish Conquest.
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 Thoughts and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind, trans. J.E. Davis)

I remember hearing about Smoky Mirror. Three thousand years ago, that vato gave himself that apodo after having an epiphany. He re-named himself so he wouldn’t forget his knowledge and mythology, so he would remember he was God. This reminds me of the naming rituals in the 60s by Chicanaos in 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 is to teach La Raza about Chicanao history and culture. If MEChA doesn’t do this, who/what org or institution will, right?

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

Coyote – people smuggler, human trafficker
Narco – drug trafficker
Malandrin – career criminal/delinquent

IVC is known for its nursing program/major. This dichotomous career list was a very real reality for a lot of us. It seemed that if you were not a peace officer, you were being arrested/detained by one. It felt like the professions that existed for us in the Valley were very limited. Needless to say, some Gente preferred to be unemployed.

“Migrant Workers”

Cagapalos – trouble makers, shit starters
Con/Safos – 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 following a type of corrida; they have to travel north and leave their homes and families in order to find education and career opportunity.

“Going to College”

Chicanos y Chicanas carry many things in their minds when they leave home for college.
Lil’bout me:

Born and bred in Brole, Valle Imperial, Southern CalifAztlán. Started off studying Mathematics but slowly went into Creative Writing. Got an A.A. in Social Science from IVC. Instructors encouraged me to continue my education. Transferred, left the Valley again, to get a B.A. in English Lit. from SDSU. Again, Profes encouraged me, so I went for my MFA in Poetry at SDSU. … And now, I want La Gente to love this like MEChA loves Che. … Email me your thoughts: shadesofbrown.thoughts@gmail.com
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 or
  non-elemental metaphors;
who are busy struggling,
  trying to make sense
what just happened to them
5, 10, 50 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 monster who unjustifiably spawns death,
y La Chingada 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?
  Buried in landfills or behind heaps of GRE study guides?

think about how Chicanao Love and lore
are made up of lies and chisme
  day-time soap operas
  prime-time telenovelas
  6, 8, 10 o’clock news coverage stressing Brown-on-Brown violence

think about Chicanaos celebrating Cinco de Mayo
  el 16 de Septiembre
about Chicanaos celebrating Mexican heroes
de la Independencia
  Allende  Hidalgo y Costilla
de la Revolución
  Zapata  Villa
think about Chicanaos celebrating Thanksgiving
   Fourth of July
about Chicanaos celebrating U.S. heroes
of Independence
       Jefferson     Washington
during 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 Death,
   or communicating with my soul,
   with past parientes/ past poetas/ past particles

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

And then I think about Alurista talkin bout
Poetry s’pose-tah He-all
       that is, it’s suppose to uplift The People
       from under the heel of oppression
Poetry is suppose to heal, Carnal!
       Poetry is suppose to heal, Carnala!!
       Poetry is suppose to heal all Raza!!

y pos pienso en people like myself;
think about how to create happiness for all of us.
Shades of Brown: Thoughts of A Young Mexican American Chicano
by Angel F. Sandoval

Thesis Abstract

This is a story (a group of thoughts) that takes place at the turn of the 21st century. A Chicano high school graduate from the Imperial Valley recalls some childhood memories and reflects on some thoughts.

It is made up of 27 poetic pieces. The titles are:

My Onda Chicana---Miseducation---Elemental Fragments---Flor y Canto---second crush---El Barrio on the North End---The type of vatos I grew up around---Religion---The need for love oldies in the north-end barrio---Chicanadas---How I became a people of The Desert---The importance of a (sobres)nombrec---Shades of Brown---The border (fence)---On A Street---This is for La Raza---On A Street, Bartola Is Heard, Protesting---love---Cora---Coatlicue: Matriarch, Mother, Malinche---The Chicanito said, “Got ahead and kill us, we’re already dead.”---Aztlán---Broken Mirror: IN LAK’ECH---What TresHuelgas says (about unions and unity)---Cut-Throat\Job opportunity in el Valle---Migrant Workers---Going to College.

It also contains a Glossary & Commentary section.

Some Chicanao themes this work considers are: education, family life, barrio life, religion & mythology, racism, self-image issues, class issues, Aztlán, the Chicanao mestizaje. … The author has said, “I’m often in Love, the fourth level, you know. And I would love it if my book one day got a spot in the Chicano Collection, the Aztlán of Love.” Puro Chicanao Love.