Gente-fication

by

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from the Anglo root, gen·tri·fi·ca·tion (noun)
/jentrəfəˈkɑSH(ə)n/

1. The process of renovating and improving a house or district so that it conforms to middle-class taste.
2. The process of making a person or activity more refined or polite.

gen·te·fi·ca·tion noun (a way of being)
pronounce it como quieras

3. When gentrification becomes personal, and the poet as native subject must invade language itself, weld English to match the sold(i)ers on one’s tongue; when mobility is not enough, and the poet must populate (to raza-ify) the canon itself…
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…is a title,
is a preoccupation,
is a commitment…
- Gwendolyn Brooks, “Primer for Blacks,” 1980

“By the time you are thirty,
you have been through a certain kind of mill…”
- James Baldwin, “Is the American Dream at the Expense of the American Negro?” 1965
Parts of an esé: Theorizing Gentrification in Post-Chicano Renaissance Literature

**Keywords:** Silicon Desert, *Get Out* for Mexicans, Elinguation as a Second Language, phantom tongue

I

**Course Description**

It seems impossible to definitively mark the beginning of gentrification, but perhaps there are two: the influx of undocumented Spaniards into Aztlán, and the contemporary displacement of minority communities by affluent, often white, ones. Such an invasion of the VC (venture conquistador) is routinely downplayed, even by progressive media outlets. As one *PBS* article, “What is Gentrification,” rhetorically asked, “Who wouldn’t want to see reduced crime, new investment in buildings and infrastructure, and increased economic activities in their neighborhoods?” Instead of spending hours digging up this white gaze, rooted front yards inside hedge funds, this class slips out of these suburban plots of ruin. That is, students will flee the fenced discourses of gentrification, which cage the conversation to strictly geographic terms. We will cross the cultural and psycho-somatic Sonora’s of English exile, into a space Chicana Feminists coined “The Borderlands” (Anzaldua 1987)

—into tierras once numbed.
The Last Day my Father Spent in México

At eighteen, Apá cleans tables at Hyatt restaurants with imported sweat. He smuggles his wife and two children into Sunday brunch. I’ve learned, with a nun’s piety, to stop calling him papá in public. He bites his tongue under every “pick it up,” and “Excuse me, señor,” grunted amidst clanking silverware. He sees the chalk of clients’ white fingers snapping the outline of EPA crime scenes; that the underside of an aguacate bears the same texture as un cuerno de chivo, of auto-defensas and carteles patrolling the plazas de Michoacán. While on this side of North America, he sees the avocado is trending, hollowed out so white people can mine its green gold to make caramel lattes.

This morning, Apá pours greasy caldo over a casuela of chiles rellenos. We huddle over the bonfires of an almuerzo, in a small apartment with three plastic chairs, but six different pictures of the Virgin Mary. My grandfather naps, while his wife tugs at the lid de una gelatina. As she struggles to peel away the pegamento, she sighs, “Eres el único hijo que aún manda dinero.”

At fifty-two, he lowers a sack of masa as a doorstop. So his parents can shuffle their feet across the carpet to open the door. So they can cross the threshold, and properly despedirse de él.
Native Encounter

I come off the freeway ramp, witness sky-scraped smallpox, cubicles built atop tiendas. Columbus snuck back with free shipping, renamed the Santa Maria Amazon. Tech-settlers declare my homeland “fast-growing.”

I caught ‘em playing house at Ikea, dragging Ottomans and quilt-feather pillows over inner city murals, la familia discounts, the getro PCS, El Galope taquería where I’d always eat the foil—leaving only the mortuary.

I peep into their registry, as they scan the brown furniture. I hide behind the Bedroom Gallery. With no Juan in sight, they switch bloody cassocks for biker helmets. I sprint to report to el pueblo, until a British lilt fastens me to her faint smile.
Primaria

Because mi tío first cried when I already was a man.

Porque aquí, lo que gana uno diario, es un mes en México.

Because when his family left, he had to stay. Because we numbed our lips with cold cereal.

Because when homeboys bent down to tie their shoes, one of us made a slurping sound.

Because Cristian wore his shirts a little too tight.

Because we all thought Mr. Fitch was just being friendly to the girls. Because Mrs. Fitch changed her last name.

Because in Disney movies, we’re always Chihuahuas.

Because when Darius and I dapped —plum elbows shot up from his shirt— my skin tingled.

Because childhood was women trying on tacones. Because Vane laughed when I said, *the yellow pair looks cute.*
Birds of Moctezuma

My webbed feet dangle
from porcelain throne, until
Apá cries from the sink,

¡Fuchi la madre! He drops his blade.
Vortexes swirl under me, smiling,
Somebody’s a little e-stinky.

I beg for the razor, so prickly thorns
can grow from my face too. He laughs,
combs the muddy gel across his headdress.

I dip mis dedos in the Gel Fija Pelo,
for a chance to be a bird too,
a slick son for $4.99.

He slaps my once-inch wings
¿Pa’que quieres peinarte?
So I can join your wage

and wait tables for bald eagles
perched in Palo Alto—
on the other side of us.

My eyes part his unbuttoned pecho,
comb through the brood patch
where I once slept, first heard

the blue flames of stove tickle
mi biberón. My body rocked
by a moustached wind.

Hungry for papá’s pelo,
I cry at my hairless hatch,
until across my chest

tinder vellitos hum
a pinkish flame.
La Reina de Tejas (Live from Astrodome)

Amá said you died the week before I born,
tenía que verte in pot-bellied teles, canal
clackling like brown-backed tortillas. Te ví
tan feroz with your jumper, before se pusieron
de moda, and the little girls who wore them
butterflew into muchachas. Te ví

con pants flared like your nariz, chata
like my sister’s. I munched on tacos, el jugo
dripping as amá squealed, La colita! Te ví

Your hands fueron castanets, size 3 Godzilla’s
tapped to their bidi bidi, to eyebrows arched
to a dome with brown-dusked faces. Te ví

como la flor la maestra Barragán showed us,
a night-blooming cactus whose name I rewrote
as selena grandiflorus. From Tejana lips, ví

the Spanish I couldn’t mouth. I recited songs
‘till words flowed like the taco’s orange grasa.
I lick my fingers, lean on the couch cover. Ví

you peer from orange-stained glass, cooing
my tongue to finally sing, Me diste túúúú.
Heart trembles that I can speak like us. Ví,

full lips like mine, hushing a field of brown arms,
their chorus tightens my tummy like when it readies
for raspberry kisses. As you leave the stage, ví

sparkles fall from your jumper onto the couch, sugaring
the seat’s puddle of drool. I felt teeth nibbling my ear,
until I wake to see Amá, ¿Ya tienes sueño mi chulo?
Forcing Second

When Rosemary smiles at me, it makes my cheeks hurt, like when I first eat a strawberry.

Her curls are bob-webs, slivers of sombra world into each other,

lost in their own loops, like when we make human knots in P.E.

She fixes a scrunchie on her back, so a M white t can hug her curves.

“Hey.” I burrow un saludo in the tanbark, heartbeats away from her leopard sandals.

I stare at Michael, the homie in all things Resident Evil.

He cranes his neck to my starchy collar, “Chill, I got chu.”

Our Pokemon Stadium debates dribble across the hallway, where thirty-two pairs of brown hands bang its pillars, chipping away at well-fed coats of turquoise.

My mind shuffles through how to defeat a Psychic type—

*Wobbuffet uses Mirror Coat, Mewtwo strikes first.*
*Ugh, how can I-

Rosemary’s freckles burst in my face like polvorones “Did you just slap my ass?”

She looks at me, me looks at Michael. Michael just laughs at the smack he gave my hand

which now, in pink flush, gets clammy at what it’s lost:

I imagined we’d kiss behind the portables, I stuttering to touch her jeans’ back pockets.

The classmates yell MOVE! But she doesn’t. She looks cold. Her eyes the color
of chocolate milk.
Handwashing Instructions at a Unisex Bathroom

1. Wet

Place hands inside
Southpole pockets.

"H-hey."  "Hey."
"So, what do we do?"  "Whatever you want."

Practice on case-less pillow.
Wake to a bulged screwdriver
which froths of premature

2. Soap

The morning of, Urban Dictionary her text,
"FWB."  "Friends with benefi:"
Put down the SAT flashcards.

"Abject"
"Abnegation"
Suck her.

Crouch
con knees
shaking
like a newborn
calf’s.

The tiles laugh
at your form.

Throw her leg on handicap rail,
‘til she moans, “I have a condom.”

Don’t be a stereotype and say,
you don’t know.

3. Rinse

With fingernails still bitten,
rasp tender walls.

“Agh, it hurts.”
Switch to middle, feel

the throbbing stalactite.
As the white mocos clump,

ask yourself, you even want to-
Shut up, all boys do.

Pull closer, so lotus flower meets your nopalito.

I can’t get it up. Me mira con piedad.

Puedo subirme. Think of girls you’ve seen

I can’t get it up!
“You going in or what?” Grunt “Yeah.”
“My legs are getting tired.” Grunt “Sorry.”

She fastens her zipper,
“It’s fine.”

4. Dry

The question perspiring on your lips,
“Did that count as your first?”
“Fabian Zaragoza of East Palo Alto appeared in San Mateo County Superior Court on charges of murder with the special circumstance of lying in wait, two counts of attempted murder with infliction of great bodily injury and use of a firearm in connection with the shooting that killed 3-month-old Izack Jesus Jimenez Garcia and wounded his parents. If convicted, Zaragoza could face life in prison without the possibility of parole… He did not enter a plea Wednesday, and his arraignment was held over until next week… He turns 18 in December.” SFGate, June 8, 2011

How to Lose a Misdebeaner

1. From the Deposition
   a. A 6th grade Pokemon card-swap
      at his house, a block and a half from mine:

   b. “Aight, I’ll give you my Shiny Charizard for those legendaries you got!”
      “ ‘Naw blood, you call that a fair trade? These two are Kanto region, 1st edition!”
      “Bruh, that Charizard was TWENTY dollas at la pulga.”
      “You wuffin’? Veinte dólares mi culo. Aight tho, tell you what. How bou-“

2. Arraignment
   a. Your honor, let me slowly chew his life-sentence,
      like the stale hot dogs for lunch.

   b. The Tongan lunch lady bribed
      our hunger for another bag
      of Dorito Cheesy Nachos
      when we complained
      the buns got mold in ‘em.

3. DNA Evidence
   a. If you pump their bullet-riddled
      stomachs, gurgling are the last bits
      of granola bars in milk crates, shipped
      all the way from the back
      of the lunchroom freezer.

   b. Cuz they only bring the good stuff
      for STAR tests.

4. The Debriefing is Objected as Irrelevant
   a. Permission for him and Alejandra to fuck
      in the back of the art room.

   b. We use the plastic salsa containers
      as painter palettes that tumble
      down the piso—fulla skid marks
      ‘cuz we be takin’ the cut-up
tennis balls out the seats’ pegs.

5. Headlines Redacted
   b. Word gags me like the tanbark at recess. Forensic test the playground’s chalky splinters for traces of violent family history.

6. Dress Code
   a. Saunter inside a shaky taquería. La cajera me mira for bringing the tall pale statue that is Tommy—
   b. He imports the greased-up tortillas into his Old World mouth
   c. My sister calls me mid-rábano, in frantic, “Fabian’s trial is today. Don’t go!
   d. We race to San Mateo Superior Court, already flanked by Univisión and ABC news vans— bilingual alliance to interview the tatted up ex-classmates who stand like Egyptian guards at the throat of the door.
   e. “Naw we ain’t here to start some shit. We jus goin’ see him to the end.”
   f. We pass the metal detectors, the Escher-looking escaleras into a room looking like a half cut-off church

7. Pardon
   a. The teary-eyed mother who curses our beardless felon, “Where are your parents?!”
   b. That blonde-locked wonder next to me, as I must never see Fabian speak as a free man, because my one white friend didn’t know you can’t bring shorts here.
   c. Before I turn to leave, my mind leaps from seeing his navy and white school uniform to this orange jumpsuit
where his name is ciphered
across his chest two-ways:

i. On the left, six numbers
   On the right, his initials—
   1. hereafter D.O.C.
The homophonic collapse when an esé must, like his Mexicans parents once did, tuck his body inside the essay, the vehicle of mobility into el norte’s universe/ity. Thus, the poem is interested in the moment when Mr. Connors lifted his fine-tipped tongue over my college personal statement, and waxed the school’s signet on my blank chest. The collection relives the heat, the heat I felt when across the polished oak, he beamed, “you have a bright future ahead of you.” It hears the quiet rattle of Mrs. Wynters, who, as she presented the library’s prize, lowered her spectacles to ask, “So how did you escape East Palo Alto?” The poem lingers on “escape”—that word. A needle filled with a blue-eyed ink that sears my skin like a Chicano tattoo, worn by bronze shoulders which flint against concrete. This work swallows the day I spoke back but the applause flooded my mouth, so I just grasped the award, felt peach-fuzz laminate in the card stock. This collection longs for the homeboys of my childhood to post up behind the stanzas, and glisten as they, we, become canonized.
The Disciples of San Mateo County, California

And God said to Juventino:
perform ablution over the bathroom sink,
press its sleek cold metal with novice palms.
Stretch out your double white t, the cotton bulletproof vest where upon stepping
in the school-yard, you’ll brave juvenile
punches. Brace the iron gaits
with knock-off Cortezes. Cuff your sagging
Dickie’s by the ankles. Saunter through
the cracked voices of boys who laugh without claim
over their bodies. Unzip your brother’s
fur jacket, and take Father’s flask.
Drink his Centenario;
shadowbox the heavy gavel-swings
with swigs of your own. Cleanse yourself
in liquor’s kerosene;
let flammable spirits purge
all nerves. To be an acolyte embalmed
in hair gel, worshipping the altars
cordoned off in caution tape,
is sainthood.
A Xicano’s Self-Help Guide to Racial Trauma

I ‘member the day I
stopped copping sentences
from Edgar Allen tipos.

I was tripin’ off a
bad dose of acid-
yellow textbooks.

Fue eight years ago,
cuando I cleansed my palate
of poisonous assumptions
over who owns this language.

When I two-stepped ‘cross the
8-times-4-equals-the-number-of-seats-inside
labyrinth of our 8th grade classroom
to ask something of Ms. Nelson,
whose dagger-thin nose dipped
in an old National Geographic,

but she had to flick
her blonde bangs pa’ verme.

I ran to the bathroom, maceta toda mareada,
and swerved over the porcelain face
of a toilet lid, only to see wastewater visions:
of septic cockroaches clogging a pipeline, middle-school-passage
from here to San Quentin;
of saw-dusted stomachs that’ve absorbed years of McDonald’s
pink sludge-cent dreams;
of one-year subscription teachers, rentin’ brown kids for a resume
like we’s an overdue Redbox;
of bussed-out high schools, so when an outbreak of Zika-
schoofights hits the suburbs, I hear one of them whisper,
“It only started when they came.”

Desperate, I huffed up recuerdos,
of papa fumigando el front yard durazno.

As he dug through the earth,
careful to not cut at his children’s
jus soli roots, I see mis lunares forming
alongside the brown hide.

I saw him, dressed in his waiter’s vest,
holding four half-written Chase checks
to ask me, “¿Mi’jo, cómo se escribe ‘one thousand’?”

And at the stub,
I see tiny ‘u’s wedged between the ‘o’s and the ‘s’s
—the dye of a lifelong debt

And after the years-long vomiting,
I utter the first three-syllable word
I, or my family, have said in English.
Como se dice,
ca- thar- sis,

so that when my biology teacher
asks me for the scientific method
to support the existence of stereotype threat,

I’ll rip open my liver and read
its holy bile.
- Stereotype Threat:

A perpetual gag reflex syndrome,
where little brown and black children
learn to dry-heave projectile statistics,
so when they take medical leave in
(if and when they get to) college,
no one asks why.

So that sophomore year,
I stopped being ashamed
of opening an aluminio-packed
tacos de frijoles in class,
even when the queso cotija would turn
blonde heads who’d say
“Ugh, what died?”

And I’m desvelado
‘cuz I spent weeks
rewriting the dictionary,

last night stopping at the ‘t’s,
the word ‘times,’ as in,
“What died?
The times you still live in.”

I bent over that shitter
‘til I finally saw the first chunks of industrial-sized
tumors spewing the piso--

I’ve been spitting the rest out
ever since.
José Eastwood: A Corrido-Haibun

**Cast (in order of appearance)**

A portly viejillo steps out of a golf cart.

A Sperry-footed suburb paces around his boots, tapping his shoulder, “Hola Danny.”

The white man-in-training flicks his tumbleweed locks up. It’s Hunter.

A lunar-speckled boy approaches José, as we both realize, “He can’t tell any of us apart.”

**Scene – “The Final Duel”**

**All Quiet on the Silicon Front (“The Ecstasy of Gold” plays)**

Fingers’ slowly descend
to the bullet belt
of paper towels.

Mis Chente cejas dart
left and right, until José pulls
a hefty bag from his dashboard.

Five gallon garbage cans line
the quad like tombstones. He ties
a small knot to one of the ends.

I can read his thoughts,
“Time to take out the trash.”

**El Feo’s Monologue**

I don’t know if I can be here. I miss Ximena’s cute smile and Devonte and them’s rap cyphers by the broken fountain and maybe Hunter’s right and they just needed a face for their brochures, and I wish the white girls thought I was handsome, or do they, or the two black girls in our grade and is my accent funny and am I too short is that why they don’t like me and which one is it and why did Tanner’s mom ask, “Oh, is José your dad?” and is she racist too, or am I exaggerating, and I did I just make it all up and-

Hunter swipes for his iPhone 6s, but in relámpago reflex, José springs to his sagging holster.

**Luck of the Draw**

Hunter’s shot is stopped
by the deafening sound
of a ripped Bounty sheet.
Letter to the Editor

Dara Keer
C|Net
235 Second St.
San Francisco, CA 94105

September 15, 2015

Dear Ms. Keer,

Last month, your colleagues cut a measly ribbon. Patted themselves on the back for offering us a new health clinic. The press bravely announced East Palo Alto as a “strategic location,” in Silicon Valley, and widely touts tech hubs like Facebook, Google, NASA Ames Research for being on the “cutting edge of social innovation.”

In your article, “Life on the Other Side of the Silicon Valley’s Tracks,” you sprinkled phrases like “we paid a visit” to this “once down-and-out” town.

There are few glaring questions your article leaves out:
1. How come I didn’t have one white friend ‘till I was 16?
2. How come I thought his private school was the White House?
3. Why did Atherton moms keep asking me if I was related to the facilities workers?
4. How should I un-learn Spanish so I can take the SAT II’s “fairly,” to quote every white boy that asked me?
5. How many times does my Dad have to make pozole for PTA meetings?

Más que nada, cómo te parace if you and your colleagues wrote about us, and not just the negative shit?

Sincerely, a “longtime resident”
Later that night, she buries her face in the sky-colored sheets of my bedroom, rubbing her tears with her Home Depot apron.

_Tu papá me llamó en su break._
¿ _No te importa?! Claro que sí mamá!_

I reach her shoulders, knead through forty six years of tender flesh, searching for those words,

_Alfinal del día, eres mi hijo._
Instead, she bursts at once.
¿ _Por qué lo hiciste?_

I sob into the knock-off Borealis of my cell’s screensaver. Tears blur the Spanish Wikipedia page of Islam. I read for her, for me, for anything but this maldito silencio.

``¿Qué más quiere que lea?"
_No._

She stares at me, eyes starless windows into those dark ages when expired pills littered the kitchen cabinets, where I desperately scoured its dosage instructions for the label heading,

FOR: TALKING THROUGH AMÁ’S DEPRESSION AGE (yr): 12 AND YOUNGER.

Quiero decirle que catequismo beat the devotion out of me; that I found more of God in the doorless parlors of eloteros and duro vendors,

in the sizzle of lime of repurposed produce bags, than in the fifty-foot pews or a Yosemite-sized Christ.
_Cuéntrale más de los más altos_

in the soup kitchen atoles,
in Father Goode’s teeth getting stuck while chewing pan dulce orejas,

than in reciting seis misterios
in la sala’s strangling light,
as we huddled around a fake chimney
with Abuela Carmen kneeling
on crumbling limestone.

I grab the silver-leafed
  bible on my bottom shelf, paw
through its fat crucifix. Olive branches encircle
  the cover. The back flap’s tattered

from where my godfather gripped
  it too tight when posing
for mi primera comunió
  foto, back in el rancho.

*Madre, te prometo que trataré,
iné a misa más,
hablaré con los sacerdotes.*

I cup her fist with both hands to tell
  her, “Cualquier cosa que pides
de mí. Lo haré, solo dime
  tu bendición.”

But I see it. Her choked-up throat chips
  away at the concrete levee,
so the dammed grief of a lost son
  trembles on her lip.

  A muddied accent spills
onto the sheets.

*Son, what didn’t our religion offer you?*
After my Shahada (November 20, 2015)

Malik pops his Chevy ‘08, offers me
a cloth whose silk thirsts in the imported oil
of my fingers. I unfurl the Moroccan cloth,
and I’m a flower boy again. My salted petals
surrounded the mariachi, guiding their trumpets
to cry inside my chest. The singing brass recasted
my torso as a stuttering trompo, who slipped
from Papá’s strings, and skidded onto la plaza.
My legless body grew the steel tips to zapatear
los nervios away. The brothers shout Allahu Akbar.
I am anointed to dervish, so I too may hear the whirs
when forehead meets sijadat, and chants God’s name.
The Hadith of Gabriel: Mawlani al-Nabi (September 23, 2015)

Inform me about Islam, el arcángel asked the Prophet; I ask
Abdul, as he coils luces verdecitos
around a mini Ka’Ba.
MSA bookish face pours plaster
over its courtyard.

I pick a brush too, but all I see
are fourth grade Mission Projects,
the cardboard churches that leaned
like cholos well-sazóned
in sureño whistles.

Habibi, cuéntame de la fe. What if I prayed
at la plaza, behind locales que venden
membrillo. And I recited al-fatihah
during las posadas, when gritos of children
and coos of grandfathers muffle
under the mango huerta? Where mothers wait
outside their doors with ollas, competing
for el mejor ponche,

What If I sang las mañanitas to the Prophet? If I mustered
my best Chente. Estas sooooooon las mañanitas
que cantaaaban al nabi. I’d see him lay on his side,
ears tickled by the frayed tassels of a sijadat.

Sidi, tell of the Hour: When my feet finally touch
Rawalpini; huaraches press the red
and green chalked heart lines, so I may gaze
at the crowded streets that motorcades zigzag past;

When I bear witness
to a boy who hoists the Pakistani flag,
like las chiquillas en secundaria who march
en la cancha, guardias de escolta who hold
la tricolor. “Paso corto. ¡Ya!”

When Father and I walk
inside Grand Jamia Mosque, and Arabic sutures
the sewing lines between fingers. As I count
dhikr, he opens his own palms, and watches
as I soften Spanish earth with the names
of a faceless God.

That I no longer tremor
in the garage, shin-bone pained
at tashahuud, when I hear
apá’s footsteps.
That I finally pray
with my eyes closed, as he collects the holy water
from the well in my eyes.
III

Texts

My beloved, let’s take inventory:

3 hours per nights spent over the phone, falling asleep
to your confession.
Two months talking.
4 visits to the mosque.
$68 spent on Uber Select (’cuz I didn’t know the difference)
A 25 cent gumball machine that popped
    in the middle of our walks around
Southpoint mall.
6 cheap-ink brochures on the faith.
One trip to Harris Teeter donde me miraste; asked
    my name not as a question, but to see how it tasted
on your lips.
Goddess Tonantzín—

at her halo, Ilhuícatl-Meztlí,  
sky and moon frolic  
under God’s cloudy cornea.

At her waist, the stars  
(s)wept with each lift  
of hem—in rickety streets,  
where even grandmothers’  
broom-fingers cannot reach.

At her feet lie the hills  
of Tepayac, which translates  
to “nose-mountain” where I breath  
the incense of burning maize  
husks and backyard fogons;

where every twelfth of December,  
bodies are hallowed out like a ney:  
coyolli attached to adobe limbs—  
each chime of their ankle seed  
stirs ribbons of prayerful smoke.  
Orejas la caracola  
that hermit to divine call.

When I close my eyes,  
I feel the dīn’s cloak,  
unable to tell if it’s  
a tilma or an abaya.

As I see La Virgen whisper to Juan Diego,  
“Fill your cloak with roses. Open it  
before the bishop. His stately Holiness,  
unable to cope with the weight  
of a single rose, will lay down  
his crozier, and kneel to the image,  
imprinted on your cotton.”

As I see Muhammad run to Khadeeja.  
“Cover me! Cover me!” She lays  
him down, places a cloak over him  
so that in the arms of beloved,  
the forty year-old prophet  
is but a child.

Between my fingers  
is a veil through which  
I may glimpse at the sun—
a burning star
that, still in dull fajr,
waters my eyes.
God, Dios, Allah,

whatever tongue
speaks to you today,
see to it

que mi corazón sea un frasco,
overflowing with el agua nacida
de los arroyos, the tear-ducts
de tu misericordia.

Convierte mi vientre
a tu huehuete, a drum,
to celebrate our union.
Melt my taut pottery
with Ibrahim’s embers.

Coil my clay
so that I am ensnared
with your bosom—
each beat an ayat.

Make my heart an oil stock
whose inner mesh clutches
onto the dregs of rosemary
that elders snuck inside this nave

of La Basílica de Nuestra Señora,
where Mayan copal,
African frankincense,
Quetzal feathers, know
not why they can burn,

yet yearn to incinerate
themselves, until fragrance-flesh
reaches Your nose-mountains.

Rid me of Adán’s obsession
to stake every plant and creature,
with Latin namesakes.

Que mi cuerpo sea un cirio
with an adobe shell that quietly endures
the heat of this dunya

enough so as to light this Basílica;
so God’s children,
    kings and beggars,
    monjas y huríes
    peasant and pope
can see each other’s toes,
and keep the lines straight.
Imam Rashid ends the khutbah
by telling us the story again,
*I used to chase Shaytan*

to the ledge of my veins, until
off the seventh floor of our trap
*I heard rasullallah. He ordered*
me to build a masjid, not just in Jersey,
*He specified right across that liquor store.*

*Now, alhamduilillah, our brothers*
gettin’ paychecks, all by sitting cross-legged
*in front of this here rehal, moving they heads*
to the saged rhythms of our beloved’s text.

*A’ight, Aqeemu as-Salah.*

A grunt faintly trims the air,
*Keep your lines straight.*

We real flossed in Friday’s best
thobes, standing shoulder
to shoulder in Nike socks.
Shoe rack gagged with flea-
marketed Tims n’ Retro high tops.

*I swerve*
past the dust-cropped tarps,
and slip back on my airforce
chanclas, sunna-style.

*I bought my bootleg’d din*
in downtown Newark,
where Al-Fatihah blasts
outside a Dollar Dear,
and God breathes
through manhole covers.

*Where Ebony temples stand*
over subwoofers to hawk
off beard oils.

*Where, peddlers yawn off*
their untagged assets.
Pawing the dhikr beads, one of ’em
opens his toothless bizarre,
*straight from the Saudi’s akhi.*
My bootleg’d dīn’s held
by Brick City’s pillars,
as thieves of light bump
they heads to dark-tinted
throwbacks.

Thumm.
    Thumm.

Thumma kallā
    sawfa ta`lamūna

My bootleg’d dīn’s qibbla
prays towards bodegas,
where vices rank-and-file
the block like a police line up

On the beat purging
for signs of last night’s
idol worship.

Outside the mosque, a Dutchmaster peers
outside a primo’s shirt pocket.
Su compa le grita, nomás agachate
ya güey. Oyes, no seas pendejo.

    It’s Don Ramón,
y ya tiene two strikes
from broken taillights
and broken English.

A crowd gathers at the back of his
rusted blue Honda:
    Don Osito’s three weeks overdue
    for build-a-bear surgery,
stickers from Priscila’s doctor visits screen
    la ventana.
    Emilio’s neon soccer shoes rest atop
    the gutted seats.

Still, the canine squad licks
    their fangs, suspecting lunch
    came early.

Behind me, the mosque rattles.
    I turn to see Rashid shadow
over the padlock.
An-Nikah (June 18, 2016)

Her brother’s voice sings in my ribcage. 
*You goin’ do this, right?*

Pienso en ese día, where she played 
with the inside

of my blue flannel. Where she caught 
my heart henna-handed.

*Here, the sleeves getting loose. 
Aw shit, the thread’s caught*

*with mine.* With unspoken music, she plucks 
each string from her abaya. She looks

at me, and somewhere between a joke 
and jab, says, *Real talk, I ain’t really been*

*into Mexicans like that.* Seven months later, 
I’m inside this Salafi mosque, where curley-headed

Luqman ushers me into a satin red room. 
Musters his high school Spanish

*Trátalas bien.* He sits next to their father 
and his hard-earned blessing.

Salma’s dressed like *La Virgen,* 
green shawl haloing her body.

Holding my hand, she leads me to sign 
the kitab. The sisters giggle at the convert-
turned-man. His fingers fumble, in the maze 
of Arabic, to find his name on the dotted line.

My eyes leave the document, follow the letters 
seep into the room, which isn’t longer a room,

but an inked sea coursing through me. Shades 
of blackness surround me, quietly lamped

by the thirty-something pairs of eyes that read me, 
re-reading the fine print of Islam, its new conditions:

*Leave Amerika.* 
*Apply for Emirati citizenship.* 
*Embrace suegro’s oil money.*
Teach English to diplomat children. 
Mine will probably lose their Spanish.

Michoacán.

A 

I

a 

h 

what did you do with Dios?

¿Dónde lo pusiste?

In EE.UU? 
In U.A.E?

My bootleg’d din threatened 
to steal me. Swallow me whole.

If I am to remain a Muslim, it can’t 
be this way.

I softly press my hands against hers, 
and confess,

Mi querida, I can’t do this. 
Isn’t it me that’s supposed to get cold feet?

No, I’m serious 
Err’things too mixed up. With me.

I take the breath I couldn’t give 
for her.

No puedo orar 
A dos dieoses.

I don’t understand...

I let the Spanish fill 
the air to ease me into 

breaking the house I’ve dreamt 

with her.

I can’t... 

worship
I look at her one last time.
Her freckles are the stars in Mt. Hira.

Two gods.
“Allah will accept the repentance of His slave so long as the death-rattle has not yet reached his throat” – al-Albaani in Saheeh al-Tirmidhi (3537).

Salaat Al-Tawbah

Astaghfirullaah Astaghfirullaah Astaghfirullaah.
Inna, I am a slave to my flesh. I clothed my loneliness with a pair of lace panties, joined the drowned hornets who floated atop frat cups, guzzled all the pineapple chunks of this dunya. Astaghfirullaah, I’ve betrayed you, skipped salaat tantas veces. Resisted bowing my head to Your dawn. Astaghfirullaah,

these dedos that groped for moans,
now count Your names. Astaghfirullaah
this half-assed fast, how I wander
next door to East Mecca, where the overhead menu

is a stomach’s marquee. Astaghfirullaah the endless two-word poems—Italian Cheesesteak, 12 inch pies—gnawing at my pansa’s line-breaks. Subhana Rabbiyal Adhim, a baby girl stares

as I pull out my last $5. Sucks her finger only to stop and slur, Salaami Aykum!
Sami’Allahu liman hamidah. Sure you don’t want cheese on it? An Egyptian cook calls

me akhi, and I am the pillar of Diamond Crystal salt that sits on the counter, next to the receipts that sag from the billows of an angry grille. Sweat drips

from his Crisco’d forehead, I’ll make it free?
O my Lord, whose melting point is mercy,

rabbighfir li.
*Fortress of the Muslim: A Convert’s Glossary*

*Tabula Rasa* is Latin for, *I first prayed on a used bath towel.*

First months filled with fitna, until I shook the cloro’d hands of a Honduran convert, cuarenta cuaresmas old.

I Lent him my tasbih for a lifetime. In honor of wiping hospital floors, of staying after every jumu’ah to put away the chairs, of the way he pronounced “Fa-yet-vil,” [Fayetteville] donde tomó su testigo.

*Prostration:* When a crane dips its dagger-head inside a sea—numbs out his dorm’s 99 cent incense. Sin sings from his MEChA forelocks, and onto sandalwooden floors. The Harlem Renaissance piles on the couch, secondary sources tower over the armrest, a Cotton Club torn from the Asian frat’s pachangas

—and drinks from the Qur’an’s ink. Drowns in reciting God’s name.

*Tawbah:* To claw towards the gate of repentance, like los peregrinos hacia la Basílica de Guadalupe; like the legless man inside this masjid who bends over metal chair. Rehab to rehal.

Astaghfirullaah. “Until the soul reaches the throat (at death) or the sun rises from the west,” hasta a Black and Mild sings from the lips of a woman in crutches,

who steadies her nicotine pen to spew the choking meadows of 4th Avenue,

where I inhale the fumes that are mine too. And I read this palm-sized *Fortress of the Muslim* in my hands. Until I can ask in the language you revealed.

Astaghfirullaah: to forgive this negligee neglect.
The murder of a teenage Muslim girl beaten and killed by a bat-wielding motorist near a Virginia mosque was likely a “road rage incident”, not a hate crime, US police said, prompting outrage from many who say the teen was targeted because of her religion. Darwin Martinez Torres, 22, has been arrested and charged with Nabra Hassanen's murder in an incident police say began as a road dispute with a male teenager who was among Hassanen's group. – Al Jazeera, June 20, 2017

Which Cobija Feels Most Comfy?: A Letter to Nabra

As-Salaamu Alaykum Sister.

All is know
is that my brother
killed you.

All I know
is that my brother
grabbed your bo-

grabbed your bod-

The-the papers said
road rage, your death

as no more taxing
than a busted taillight,
like when they said

Deah, Yusor, and Razan
were a parking dispute.
Ay hermanita, I’ve spent

the past four days
whispering your name
with hands cut

by the blades
of grass that pillow
your hair.

with hands willowed
in dua. But palm lines fled
to trace their ancestry

elsewhere, across the Atlantic,
to the Birth of a Nation’s Nation,
where the ghoulish white hood

of a van drove into Finsbury Park,
shouting, I WANT TO KILL
ALL MUSLIMS!

And for the first time, I saw
an Islamic extremist.
Imam Mohamed Mahmoud

protects the suspect
from the mob, issues
the anti-Western fatwa,

We pushed people away...
until he was safely taken
by police....

Imam Mahmoud professed
to Sky News, I am no hero.
But who is ours?

Ya Allah, I beamed
a DC adhan to call
some sunnah superhero.

But there’s no star-spangled
shield to guard your glasses
and Jannah-gated smile

because Captain America
wasn’t made for you.
No Wonder Woman to sway

her jiggling thighs, half-naked
feminism, to deflect blind-eyed
bat swings with 8 karat belt buckles.

Sister, let me still pay
for next year’s prom dress—
a mermaid lavender

so after iftar, I’ll hear
the fiqh disputes of uncles
slamming hairy-knuckled
gavels, Astaghfirullah,
there’ll be boys, drinking,
your father interrupts, and me.

Let me stand over the minarets
of Univisión and Telemundo
and la pinta and the bus stop

and la clínica, and the bench
at recess and tell el pueblo,
mi pueblo, to enshroud you

in our finest cobijas—
those linens not even hawked at la pulga.

Let me quietly clean tu cuerpo over el agua nacida de la barranca, the river-

mountaintops to see the heights my people could’ve soared for you.

Let my apolog—
take a lifetime,
take my lifeline—
hang on this letter, ‘y?’

Why must this land learn Arabic names at eight o’ clock?

Why must sister Aydin write a Facebook post warning sisters to travel in groups, in broad daylight?

Why couldn’t you finish Ramadan first?!

Why? Why? Why?
Seventeen Words, One for Every Year You Were Given

All I know, 
is that every Muslim 
in America,

before fajr, 
became an atheist 
to American Progress.
“...and the most serious effect of the mill you’ve been through is, again, not the catalog of disaster, the policemen, the taxi drivers, the waiters, the landlady, the landlord, the banks, the insurance companies, the millions of details, twenty four hours of every day, which spell out to you that you are a worthless human being.” James Baldwin

Parts of an esé

IV

Grading

Trauma is weighted as follows:

Formal Essays (35%)

Write “Children of Immigrants” – 5% (doubled if undocumented)
Write “first generation” – 10%
Mention the color of the coyote’s van – 5%
Keep family in the past tense – 5%
Write birthplace next to its murder per capita rate – 10%

In-Class (25%)

Don’t correct them when they say your name wrong – 5%
Go by Tony starting sophomore year – 5%
Stay quiet when they make fun of Keisha – 5%
Believe Tim when he says, “You got in because you’re-“ – 5%
When it’s your turn to read, pronounce it as gwa-da-mala – 5%

Participation (5%)

Turn to the person next to you; debate your belonging
Introduction

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3
Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.
- English Language Arts Standards: Writing: Grade 6

And the stars began to moan

because our sky is full of ghosts,
dwarf madres que esperaron
eons para sus papeles. Cruzaron

through sunken night, praying their wombed
moons held their mouthless breaths
under sonorense floodlight.
Las Chácharas they Carried

“¿Señora, qué declara?”

1. Discount shaving cream.
2. Tortillas wrapped in black plastic bags.
3. The telephone number of USCIS. Vaporub, which in Spanish translates to “comprehensive health care.”
4. A child’s nosebleed.

“What’s the intention of your visit?”

5. A child who stirs awake, since Nyquil’s starting to wear off.
6. Father’s sombrero that I promised to never take off the wall.

“If I search your vehicle, will I find anything?”

7. Soap camouflaged as sea salt.
   (Before LUSH, there was VO5 champú.)
8. La madrugada, whose bordertown haze stains your mother’s dress.”
9. An analog TV set to plop my chubby brown hijo in front of Sesame Street…

“Ma’m, please step outside.”
Parts of an esé: Research Topic: (assi)mill(ation)

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.7**

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including especially a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the [body] when appropriate...
demonstrating understanding of [your tongue] under investigation.

And the stars began to moan

Porque dieron luz
en tierra desconocida,
waited for I.C.E.-
stricken rostros to thaw

over el vapor de un caldo
de res publica, which is Latino
for the paperless republics
that tendered my body

in sleepless exhaust
and coined me too,
a stardust costal
until burlaped skin

passed through a mill
whose bleached
teeth whispered,
refinement.
Counter-Argument

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.6
Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal [Spanglish] when indicated or appropriate. (See Juana, Édivan, or visit your local paisano for specific examples).

- English Language Arts Standards: Speaking & Listening: Grades 9-10
- Research to Build and Present Knowledge (of Self)

And the stars began to moan

Concession: Dear Jimmy, no pude
traer mi familia conmigo
a la universidad, so I sung
your sweet tenor, as it towered over
the sons of slavers,
where Cambridge Caucus
-ians debated, “Is the American
Dream at the expense
of the Negro?”

Reaffirmation: On your lips,
English felt possible.
Parts of an esé: Conclusion

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.9.B**
Apply grades 11-12 Reading standards to literary nonfiction (e.g., "Delineate and evaluate the reasoning in seminal U.S. texts [amber-skinned saplings that petal for change], including their application of constitutional principles and use of legal reasoning demand that Senator Schumer prove his word [e.g., when the seven Dreamers went on a hunger strike to press a vote for DACA],..."

---

**English Language Arts Standards: Speaking & Listening: Grades 9-10**
- Research to Build and Present Knowledge (of Self)

And the stars began to moan

Porque las semillas del cielo crecieron a ser ocho senadores, bursting on the flower pot

-bellied senadores of Capital Hill. They spore witness to the perennial pendulum

of silk tiles, the cordless quiver of budding interns—all the well-fed stalks of careers rooted

in tilling their promise. They morseled on the cupped hands of mothers who prayed under shawls

of their curtained homes, Señor, cuide tus hijos, que huelgan ahora en Wáchinton. Te lo ruego. Guard

her bearded sun who rallied the orbit of news cameras. Heated its glass to mesh canticle

with clavicle, they’ve taken so much from me they’ve taken my fear.

...

After the vigil, I pour caldo from la olla, its sides charred from the restless chant

of flame. I kiss my hosts as my parents once did theirs—lift the crowned
bowl of thorny chayote, brown skinned papas, yellowing limbs of leg—
their first American meal. I salt

the broth with my eyes, taste
the seasoned bones I refuse
to digest, we could petition

and march until we wore
ourselves out, it would change
nobody’s fate.

Beloved Baldwin, what if we wrote
because they dared to chant
again? Because they planted

their names beneath Schumer’s
desk, banging against the cells
of empty stomachs. Because

NO DREAM. NO DEAL. Watch,
as the sacks of seed glow and shake
above all their heads.

As you prophesized,
the very cup of trembling.¹

¹ The final words of “Sonny’s Blues.”
Conjugations of my Tía’s Back

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ella</th>
<th>Yo</th>
<th>Nosotros</th>
<th>Ustedes</th>
<th>Tú</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ay….mi’jo no ya comí gracias.</td>
<td>Debating the line break.</td>
<td>They fight against la vejez like a cement mixing truck.</td>
<td>(Apá it’s learned. ¿No qué is lurn-duh? Sí es, pero aquí, you pronounce the extra “ed.” ¡Ay puto inglés!)</td>
<td>- Maybe this line’s too aggressive?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lo sobo, y sobo, y sobo.</td>
<td>Quisiera regresar a México con estos dedos, de ammonia, y grasa de torta,</td>
<td>The guy who picked me up at Reno played Santana, and I cashed in my affirmative action when he waited an extra 6 minutes for my luggage to arrive.</td>
<td>In this context, pinche means “fucking.”</td>
<td>As if no other aspect of craft existed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Qué hay acá para mí?</td>
<td>Quisiera regresar a México con estos dedos, de ammonia, y grasa de torta,</td>
<td>La novia says when I cut my hair to a 0, I look 35% more Chicano; adds an extra 10 if I put on a purple plaid.</td>
<td>Well not “fuck” exactly, not in the sexual sense.</td>
<td>As if the poem is too ethnic. You know, like ethnic ethnic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Qué hay acá para mí?</td>
<td>I said her back hurts!</td>
<td>What if you button the to-Girl don’t even start.</td>
<td>Tiene más que ver con exasperation, con estar desesperado that you feel the need to understand everything in this poem.</td>
<td>- Maybe, you should throw some German, quote Nietzsche, or Husserl, or Sartre, or Lévi-Str-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Qué hay acá para mí?</td>
<td>Craft exercise 1: Use chiasmus</td>
<td>My tía breaks line—asks for work comp.</td>
<td>¡De Dolores, cruzando la frontera, tres días sin comer, sin agua, sin sins!</td>
<td>Is this poem smarter now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Qué hay acá para mí?</td>
<td>In this poem: Four Mexicans already offered to fix stanza’s roof, drywalled all negative space.</td>
<td>Saw 37 Latinos lost in Duke’s 1300+ Class of 2016. Thought of <em>Invisible Man</em> scene at Liberty Paints Plant. Ten</td>
<td>¿Qué piensas? ¿Qué has pensado? All these centuries</td>
<td>Can it be an expat too?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Qué hay acá para mí?</td>
<td>My tía breaks line—asks for work comp.</td>
<td>Will spend 3/4ths of the time commenting on the use of bilingualism.</td>
<td>(the tú is informal).</td>
<td>Can it be abstract too?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Qué hay acá para mí?</td>
<td>Tan learned. Tan pinche leaned.</td>
<td>As if no other aspect of craft existed.</td>
<td>Can it be <em>too</em>?</td>
<td>Can you fix her back?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Qué hay acá para mí?</td>
<td>Will spend 3/4ths of the time commenting on the use of bilingualism.</td>
<td>As if the poem is too ethnic. You know, like ethnic ethnic.</td>
<td>¿Qué piensas? ¿Qué has pensado? All these centuries</td>
<td>¿Qué piensas? ¿Qué has pensado? All these centuries</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
drops of black chemical for “our white so white.”

Papá asked if she needed extra pillows for her back. Nine free hours now—las llena con preguntas, con,

“¿Qué quieres que te prepare amor?” She shuffles tostada brands, lava el apio twice, squeezes la tortilladora, palm-pressed silver kept from Cortés and the boss who just laid her off.

| drops of black chemical for “our white so white.” | Sus cuentos embalmed in the mahogany varnish of our 11 pm dinner-pláticas. |
| Papá asked if she needed extra pillows for her back. Nine free hours now—las llena con preguntas, con, | Su historia will die if I don’t write it, and her back hurts! |
| “¿Qué quieres que te prepare amor?” She shuffles tostada brands, lava el apio twice, squeezes la tortilladora, palm-pressed silver kept from Cortés and the boss who just laid her off. | ¡Coño! |
Parts of an esé

V

Final Project: Brown Primer
(35% of your worth)

In this last section of the collection, students will exchange mill for moledora, the rusted corn-grinders of Michoacán. To do so, this class will return to my family’s village.

1. **Annotated Bibliography of La Lengua**
   Pay Mago with the peso of your tongue. With wrinkled fingers, she’ll softly shred the red serpent like misa wafers. Now mute, you’ll hear the rickety engine hums awake. You’ll both watch the chained-long words ooze out from the base like a toxin. Doña will cure the meat in the rack. You’ll insist on it back, she’ll display it in Sunday mercados, el pueblo will marvel at how not even flies will skirt around it.

2. **Outline of the Ashen Remains**
   After three days, return to Mago’s fábrica, where she’ll hand you a bag of maíz. Take this second earth back to Abuela’s, head towards la fogata, canopied under corrugated tin. Relive her hands sliding over stone. Close your eyes, relieve the heat of her brownsmiting, the smelting of Mexica gold as the tortilla rests on the coughing skillet. Lime the wet masa con tus lágrimas. That it took this long.

3. **Draft Your Own Lesson Plan**
   As the corn cooks, imagine standing en la esquina of your block. You’re waiting for the McNair kids to get out of class. Borrow Jesus’s propane tank, promise you’ll bring it back before the partido starts. Under the shade of the frutero who’s there on the regular, break the barrio bread into a casuela. As you hear the accents tumble past the crossing guard, soak the pot in chile, and announce this brown primer. Call it “Poetry like Chilaquiles.”

4. **Turn in Final Esé**
   Please print the final esé in maiz-made paper, to be signed by the lips of hungry schoolchildren.

But before all this, you’re still at that cocina en Mexico. Wrap the columns of corn in a pañuelo, and head to la aduana, the checkpoints of policed language.
The customs agent switched his nightstick for a number two pencil and asked at workshop, “I’m not sure what this word means here. Does anyone know?”

Las Chácharas I Carried (Translated from the Mexican)

1. A cutting board to butcher my tongue and hope bleeding’s a universal language.

2. A bilingual dictionary—kept abreast like the Khan family’s pocket constitution

3. The English word for the Aztec adage: “It takes 3 seconds to google my shit.”

4. A book of poems to hand my father, the edges smeared in molcajete and refried beans.

5. My tears as apá strains his chords to read my hymns for him

6. An ink made of his cook orders.

7. His baby blue dress shirt to wear at my MFA thesis committee.

8. The declaration, “It’ll be in ambos idiomas.”

9. A voice recorder to replay his voice in the hollow walls of my Newark apartment until I finish singing the Barrio Beatitudes.

10. His question, “¿Hijo, cuándo vas a regresar?”
First Time I was Called a Spic

My mother pushes a stroller above the freeway. Paint raspado like lotto tickets that clog sewers. Inside port-a-cuna, a chunky chango mUNCHes on last bits of taco.

Corn flaps, dangling and sauced, mock the hunger-kicks in her stomach. The exhaust of red taillights, white front, and blue cielo will match the American flag knitted on my sweatshirt.

The other Mexican boys drag each other’s backpacks, starched shirts cologned by Papá’s sweat. Amá wipes chile from my cheeks, and kneels down por la última vez.

My mother pushes a stroller above the freeway, so I’d march to Palo Alto, streets stripped of golden cross and golden arch only blonde locks, realtors on second wind. Brown heads enter with foam ear plugs, drown out the private school sirens. Placed in groups of four to five, I dug

the freckles of Sydney’s back, pawing the tawny pebbles, but my hands slipped in the murk of her gleeful burst, I wish I had your tan.

My mother pushes a stroller above the freeway, so Mr. Matta will slap me on the shoulder, and shout in a homemade mantra

I want you to go because history will speak of you. Six of us fly to the minority conference in San Diego. For the first time,

I feel beautiful, a sea of brown faces gushes a grin. At the boardwalk, I split a set of fries with the date I met at the lunchtime talk.
We cloak our skin in a border-town’s dusk, until she stops
and asks me to pick the palm
tree where she’ll crop

her breath under my shirt.
The warm gusts coo my neck
like a cobija freshly taken out
la secadora. With hands flecked

I glide back to the hotel.
A man stands outside a bar.
Bubbles of Corona foam
from his mouth. He spars,

*Got some taco bell huh?* I volley
back, *Naw man, I think you buggin’
It’s Jack in the Box;* with that
I’ve left the sacred convent

of not talking back. He hisses
as I turn, *spic,* so the leash
against my neck can pull me
back to the curb and teach

my children, and my children’s
children, and my children’s
children’s children, to spend
their lives refilling his drinks,

and valeting his car at fingers’ snap.
Mr. Matta charges for him, held back
by the other chaperones. Peach fuzz
boys and hair-straightened girls, still tacked

with their name tags, circle me,
*Hey Tony, are you ok?* The tingling
comezón from swimming in mi ser
is drained. Siento encuerado, stinging

from the cudgels that chased me.
At that moment, I want to grab
my phone to ask my mother,
*How many times did you have*

to cross that bridge?
Tele-Marathon-Machus

- To my little brother Aaron

**Book 1: Spar Wars**

A lightsaber,
still in its Target tag, refracts
my laptop’s light. Jam-sticky
fingers smear the insides
of my blazer. “Wanna piece
of me?”
He—hungry to vanquish me.
I hungry
for his eyes
to adore me.

**Book 2 – The Odyssey [Abridged]**

I walk towards him—
each tile a continent.
An aging Aegean sea.
13 years keeps
his six missed phone calls
a day embayed, landlocked.
4 years in Durham,
to be a first-gen Padawan;
another 2 in Newark,
to be his Jedi Master
in Fine Arts.

**Book 3 – Suitors of Self-Doubt**

So yes, together, we’ll strike:

The fruit-hanger selva,
where dew-starved succulents
pistol whip their pistil hips. Lotus-eating
flower bombs who hijacked my boyhood
off a unisex school bathroom.
The dishwasher maelstrom: Trial of Ajáx,
rabid soap that’s gnawed at our uncles’ hands.
Now raw phalanges stuck
in a 2-wage vortex. All to give
you and me
a fighting chance.

The Pots-and-Pan’s Labyrinth. Teflon death-songs hiss
at their canola oil’d skin; that singe
swarthy arms with second-degree
citizenship.
And soon you’ll meet, the sons of Cerberus.
   Blue-nosed watchdogs who’ll sniff
   a hint of your last name, “Lopez.” When you sail
   to their netherworld nevera, they’ll
   feign frostbite. They’ll try to freeze you
   in the dead of dreams,
when they smell the “stinky Mexican cheese” that fumes
   from papá’s Nissan Sentra and come
   for your golden-brown’d flesh.

Book 4: Q & A while Buying Old Spice

Tony, didn’t Hades have a wife?
   Yes Aaron.
And, Tony, isn’t that why we have the seasons?
   Yes. Aaron. But just gimme
   a sec to figure out what shampoo I wa-
Yeah, her name was like Purse Pony. Perseu- Perf- Percocet-
   Persophone!
Oooooooo!.Yeah. That’s right!

Book 5: Carve a Boat from my Longing

And I return home
   by pressing onward
   the soft knoll
   of your shoulders.
Tasbih, (I don’t want this poem to be in English.)

I once called you rosario. A crucifijo clenched
in abuela’s hand. Her lágrimas—stuttered lluvia que cae
al rancho, that tear carretera stones, that cry
for the drunken sons whose roadside skulls
soften patrimony.

I want men to stop leaving her,
for abuelo Güicho to rise
from cerro cemeterio, to lift
his sombrero from the living
room, and wrap a handmade concha
in a red bandana—his token for the Mictlán-labores;

to stop seeing grandchildren’s English
hit her face like the steam of store-bought Maizena;

to take this poem,
and blanket her for winters
in el norte.

I am afraid to join this male’s betrayal, to open my palms and expose
the polished orbs where I recite Allah’s names:

Ar-Rahman, Ar-Rahim. Al-Malik...I asked an imam,
what is the fiqh of unravelling the beads’ string,
and knot the Catholic—to keep my godfathers, to take
her maiz-chalked dedos and kiss them
with mole-stained lips?

The controller. The powerful. The strong.
I ask You, what is the medhab of Mexicans
who pray at the feet of women?

Whose hands jamás folded
for an absent man, and instead, sunk
their nails in wet earth, slabbed
tortillas to feed her diez hijos, and sang
to the mockingbirds perched
in thin chilitos.

The Gentle, when you finish the strokes of my grandmother’s
self-portrait, pause at our hormiguero
en el norte, our cities on an ant-hill.

Bless this tasbih that softly rattles
in my tachuche’s pocket.

Make me think of her every time
I hear its rain.
The Memory of Hunger: A Response to Richard Rodríguez

I hold her shoulders, glassy eyes that once wiped mine

tantas veces, y le digo, “Mamá, gané la beca.”

Our lil’ Pulgas Ave in uproar. Tías y me felicitan,

con el himno nacional “Qué lejos has llegado.”

Later that night, Aaron sheepishly taps

my blazer’d shoulders, “Tony, you think

three hours is enough to study, then we play?”

Piles of vague theses written

on my face, and in his, a Soulcalibur V game booklet.

I am afraid that London fog will dissolve

my champurrado heart.

That my degrees—of B.A. and maestrías and dos doctorados—

will be of separation. That a credit card number is braille for how I treated

my father, an Automated Toño Machine. That Duke busts

my greaser face on a Perkins library plaque, an extra Windex brillo
to their Piedmont stone, pero que no he sido

a Fabuloso son.

Richard, as marooned Mexicans, can we break

the Museum of Other that curated

our bodies? Ignite this canon not with gunpowder,

but with the sodden tinder of my father,

“Acá te espero, mi campeón”? 

Dear Elder, quizás memory is a hunger,

that twenty years later, crosses

a pond that isn’t El Rio Bravo.

But what if my father pronounces “line,” so it becomes leña

burning inside me, so I may wade this lonely body

of work with swarthy oars so my accent will echo

inside Oxford Union, erode the medieval stone

with a waiter’s shoe polish. His stained glass English

translates Marshall Scholar as “Mi hijo es un Marcha,”

so I am not a figure,

but the part of Anglo speech whose hyphen

betrays a chasm.

That is to say, un verbo mojado, Deferred Action movement que trabajará en putiza

to bridge the English Channel with all our dichos, nuestras formas de pensar,

so every sentence can feed your, and our,

forget.
DOCTORA
DACA
HIJA, SOLO
SEPA K YO-
I- LUV S YOU
BERI MUCH
daca

DARÉ—
TODO—
CADA JU-MX
TAMP -ICO
INCA COLA
JUGO, DE MI SER,
PARA K QUE DES
J-JIR JEIR HERE.
POR N MIS BRAZ OS,
HAY NING UNA L EY.

***
I’ve had

pean wages.
‘Apa fue un peón
de este país.
Cómo lo extraño.
The heart weighs 11 ounces.
Ounces amá.
Ounces.
Ounces.
And you lift
that chancla-
throwing mano,
until tus besos
limpian mis dedillos,
and we share
syrup’d lips
and concoct
a new matte and
sing the new
Selena song
until papa comes
home:
BIDI
BIDI
BALM!

But not anymore.
Once upon, a PBS show,
Like cuando mirabas la cocina,
todo un desmadre.
And I vow,
to never wash
these hands.
And you lift
that chancla-
throwing mano,

This week, we will

to open una clínica
en cada barrio;
that tú y yo would start
our diets, otra vez,
and you hold in
your palm,
and you
hold in
your palm,
and you
hold in
your palm,
and you
hold in
your palm,

8 hundred thousand the 5th time this week,
DACA, DACA, pre-med.
DACA, DACA, pre-med.

equals 3 million chamber valves, all
heart, so we start our diets, otra vez,
were en cada barrio;
and we share syrup’d lips
and concoct a new matte and sing the new Selena song
until papa comes home:
BIDI
BIDI
BALM!

to pick the best
strawberries in the farmers’ markets
and dip them in like you say it, je-rchi’s choc’late.

to live only spicing the four letter or less spaced
gave me.

And I vow,
to never wash
these hands.
And you lift
that chancla-
throwing mano,

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until papa comes home:
BIDI
BIDI
BALM!

That I may not
even get to go.

And I vow,
to never wash
these hands.
And you lift
that chancla-
throwing mano,
until tus besos
limpian mis dedillos,
and we share
syrup’d lips
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a new matte and
sing the new
Selena song
until papa comes
home:
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BIDI
BALM!

Like cuando mirabas la cocina,
todo un desmadre.
And I vow,
to never wash
these hands.
And you lift
that chancla-
throwing mano,
until tus besos
limpian mis dedillos,
When Amá Asks Me, “Describime El Escuau?”

- Squaw Valley Writers Conference (July 28th, 2017)

¿Pus qué te diré? Imagine
a giant raspado glazed atop the peaks.
Mango chunks of sunlight topped off a granite cliff.

Montoya was right. God’s an “Iceworker.”
Grains of morena tapered from a soggy Dixie cup.
*Aguas*, he whispers, *se te entumirán las manos*
sticky with fruit syrup. Prueba su Tutti Frutti—
you’ve tasted an entire mountain.

Acá, if you sang in Squaw, no vecino
te citará. No, la noche would take
off its starry earrings, desmaquillará
its city smog. Her naked breath would sit
on your lips, “¿Dime hija, why so restless?”

Acá, the river’s inquieta como tú.
Olas crash into one another
like two pairs of patas that scratch
each other in hangnail-fencing,
under the épée mask sheets
of a living room mattress. A match-cry,
¡Córtate esas uñas cochinó!

Acá, hay árboles for a million navidades
brushstrokes tan finas, parecen
the backdrop of a Sears album.

Acá, snow falls like queso cotija,
crumbles of México atop six dollar China,
rimed with “los laureles.” Linda Ronstandt roars
from a paint-chipped deck.

Acá, the cables of a ski lift bend
like homegirls’ chicles. Mouths stretch valles
de la plática. Tremors of rubbery sap
snap along jawline, “Oooo hermana, déjame contarte
de lo que me dijo Emanuel.”

They turn their necks sideways
like these A-frame edificios, arches
second only to your strip mall cejas, plucked by
la mujer árabe con manos feroces.

Mamá, if there was a telenovela here,
it’d be called *La Reina del Snow*,
name of the rickety iglesia que paso diario
with these grease-chango hands, stained
by the anglo sludge of anaphora y tursett
y sé que you can’t read the previous line

pero sepa, I’m always writing
to you.

Pero créemelo, I’ve waded through Squaw long before
mis tenis hit Reno. Cada día this mile-high poesía
where I inhaled this oxygen-thin industria,
where the change in social elevation
me marea…

Mamá, can el frutero
teach me en-yamb-ment?

Mamá, can you copyedit this uva-vine chisme,
que daré a craft talk titled, “My Brown Voice
Can’t spell Refrain without Efrain?”

Mamá, today a steel chafer handed
me a business card, heated
my chest con promesas
— de becas y residencias, y una publicación—

but all I can see is papá sirviéndome
across this table, hands tightly folded
like restaurant napkins.

My first words threshed from the backstorage wheat
de su bigote.

Mamá, I imagine your voice beckons
plumes of la galaxia. God’s milky ear trails
to the rhinestone-tacones stomping
outside this deck—

el meadow tu micrófono, where you teach
me to sing the nights
without you.
Ya Es Hora (It’s Nation Time Remix)
- After Amiri Baraka

Ya es hora
de reunirnos. Put away
the saco and corbata politics.
Time to be one thick, picoso, brown mole.
Hora de levantar.
Ser.
Be
come. Ahora, para ser.

Que-

Que-

Que-

Quetzalcoatl, descend
to the underworld earth to
retrieve from the bones
of the Sonoran desert
the 5th sun

of man who lies still grasping cuatrocientos ochenta y dos pesos
—it’d be five hundred but he spent eighteen munching
on stale papas fritas off a haggard street vendor—

Levántate! To be
the future of the world!
Brown folx is the future of the world!
Be. Come.
Rise up. Wise up.
Son del brown feathered serpent.
Move—

from mud brick back.
from bleeding heartbeats in Teotihuacán
from ankle rattles and serpentine headdresses
from Fire Dance war drums and mortar aflame
in the center.

Hyea!!
Come out spics.
Drink your pulque, let the trance.
Trance.
Trance.

Levántense levántense. Wake up earlier
than the motherfucking Mexicans
on Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe.
Con tu burrito sabanero, sing
“Cordero de Dios” to the toppa tus lungs.
Your hijos got the app for the I.C.E. checkpoints.
Once you finish learning how to make the ‘t’ sound,

Tell Goldman Sachs to pay the coyotes lo que nos falta.
Tell el chapo we’ll give ‘em the money by Sunday.Citizens’ arrest Ese orange-haired payaso asqueroso, pa’ decirle que we ain’t goin nowhere’s holmes.
Go’head, build that muro. Crown it with barbed wire. Give it a week n chu’ll fina find belt buckles, tejanas, wedding dresses, soccer shoes, wallet photos with a 13-digit telephone number con the prefix 011 on the back, a clean pair of chones, pocket-sized patron saints, and a teenage girl with pelo lasio holding a sign that says, “Fuck weed.
Legalize my mom!”

No matter what you choose
to call yourselves, come out come out:
the half-white blanco that only checks Latino for a scholarship, but never shows up for a single general body meeting the soul sister who can only speak Spanish from her hips, the store clerk Margarita that speaks fluent broken English.

Come together un pueblo unido Come out spics spics spics spics. Come out come out. It’s nation time.
It’s nation time.

Before the roaches finish
the down payment for squatting in detention cells.
Before you need two proofs of residency to get a state ID.
Before they detain Wildin again.
Before they repeal DACA.
Before they quiet the queers’ 1st amendment rights.
Before a uterus is a threat to national security.
Before another “No Indictment.”
Before Philando bleeds out on the shrugged shoulders of Facebook Live.
Before Felipe joins him.
Before stealing Swishers is justifiable homicide.
Before another Juan. Juantoomany. Juan should be enough for us to valer madre.
Before they take down the BRIDGE Act.
Before Jaime loses his leg to diabetes.
Before picking up abuela Carmen from church.
Before the Qur’an is prison contraband.
Before before before.

Before the founding undocument, recite the declaration:
  We hold these truths to be self-evident,
  that no human being is illegal.

When hermanos wanna stop asking how to pronounce their freedom, come out spics spics.
Come out spics spics spics. Come out.
Help us stop the predator-in-chief.
Help us build a new world.

Spics come out, raza unida
  as we link hands atop La Bestia,
  that if we sleep, we’d slip to our deaths.

No se les olvide, as you approach the prosperous Norte, the tongues of your mothers aren’t on the currency exchange;

and we are the same, all shades of anger.
Come out spics come out.
Come out spics come out.

Mujer at this point I don’t care, just get up and put on something! Mexican and woman makes you already two strikes late to everything.

It’s nation time eye ime.
  It’s nation ti-eye ime.
It’s nation time eye ime.
  It’s nation ti-eye ime.
  Chant with the tamborazo
  It’s nation time.

It’s nation time, get up hermana!
  It’s nation time. Build it.
Get up JuanGa, give us your best mañanitas
Get up Celia, pick up the Bata drums.
Get up Selena, help her pick out a cute bra. “Que it’s a bustier!”
Get up Anzaldúa, show her where the serpent’s teeth marks lie.
Get up Emiliano, pass down your bandolier.
Get up Hidalgo, teach her how to shout her homilies.

C’mon!
Err’body’s outside, esperándote.
Get up here bow.
It’s nation time.
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