

NOT GUANTANAMO, or YOU'RE GONNA CRY

**A Performance Text About How a Latino Artist Comes to Redefine
His Own Relationship to Latinos in the San Francisco Bay Area**

By Paul S. Flores

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You're Gonna Cry (PART I):

Mission Offspring

1.

In 1995 I left a suburban apartment complex
in the south bay of San Diego
to find an audience in San Francisco
I left the Offspring of English Only
Mexican Nazi lowriders and Navy brats
and embarked on a ship of listeners
who could swing to poetry
Who could dance salsa in shell toe Adidas
and Kangol caps
Who knew the Popol Vuh
Melle Mel and Kerouac
Who could diddy-bop
Skizzle-skat
Hip-hop do-dat
Doo-doo dat-dat-dat

POPUL SUBURBAN, *A Mayan Girl on SF State Campus selling Latin American cultural products*

Ever get that feeling like you're on the wrong bus, headed to the wrong side of town? And it's like an express bus, and you can't get off? Not like you're going to the bad side of town, but like the place you don't belong. Like you know you shouldn't be there, but you're headed there anyway? I feel like that every day, especially on campus. That's why I'm going back to El Salvador. I have to find a place to live down there. So I gotta make some money to pay for the trip and living expenses.

Are you looking for a huipil for your girlfriend, or your mom? Is she Latina? I just got those in on Tuesday. Are you Latino? You look like—I mean, I guess they would fit you...Sure. No. Go ahead. You like the red one? Try it on. But you do know those are women's shirts, though, right? Maybe you could create a new trend. Huipiles for men. My nephew is four and he always wants to wear my huipiles. He calls them dresses and he spins around, and loves to watch the hem as he twirls. Then he puts on a pair of my tacones, that I call my salsa shoes, and the boy is ready to dance. Qué lindo!

I also have dolls. Hand made from dried cornhusks and dressed like Subcomandante Marcos. Viva the Zapatistas! Todos somos Marcos, right? See, but I like to say we're all Mayan. Do you need some sage for your altar? Dia de los muertos is coming next month. Or for a real revolutionary gift how about making a donation? All proceeds go to La Raza Student Organization and our trip to El Salvador next summer.

So are you from Sanfrancisco? Well, I thought you looked a little, you know, *unsure*. That's why

I was asking if you felt...awkward here. It's ok if you do. It's a place for awkward people, right? Is this your first year at SF State? New year, new inmigrantes. I don't mean you're an immigrant. But there's nothing wrong with that, verdad qué sí? I am. Could you tell? Maybe not by the way I talk, huh? The way my mom tells it, my father was a lieutenant or colonel in the Army in El Salvador who did some bad things during the war. War is hell, I guess. My mom says he was influenced by the higher ups to do it. Like if he didn't do it, they were going to put him in prison and probably torture him. Huh? I guess he, like, burned people alive inside their homes for collaborating with the rebels. But I don't think my father was capable of doing that, because I could never do something as horrible as that. I was too young to remember my father, though. He died in the war when I was a baby. My mom told me he died in an explosion. And then we left El Salvador and moved to Walnut Creek when I was like three.

There's no real proof he did it, but I'm not supposed to go back there on account of my name. It's Ana Popul. Just Popul. Like Popul Vuh, The Mayan Creation myth, yeah. It's not my real name. It's my communist name. I'm down with the RCP. Yeah. You know me. Revolutionary Communist Party. We have to create new names so the FBI can't keep records on us. Can't track our histories or our families. Honestly, I can't tell you my real last name because some people might get offended. No, for real. If you knew who I really was, it might put even you in danger. There's a lot of spies here in Sanfrancisco...rebel refugees from the civil war. People are still missing and suffering, and there's a lot of pain and painful memories. And if they knew my name they might want to get revenge on my father by coming after me. My mom is all paranoid about it. So she got remarried to a gringo, dyed her hair blond and got us a big house in Walnut Creek. How like, bourgeois, huh? No one would ever know my mom's from El Salvador, until they heard her curse. One time me and my mom took my nephew to see the luchadores, you know the fake Mexican wrestlers at Cow Palace. Well, my nephew was really into it, but my mom started shouting all kinds of curses, hijueputa, maricón, throwing peanuts and stuff at them. Then my nephew started shouting hijueputa, too! And he's only four. It was hilarious. Can you imagine a short, middle aged, fake blond, Salvadoran socialite turned suburban Latina travel agent yelling at short brown men in tights rolling all over each other? My mom still has a lot of pent up rage from growing up in El Salvador.

But I see it like I'm going back to El Salvador to restore my family's name. I want to go back and show them that I want to help. Supposedly, my family has a lot of property in San Salvador, but I wouldn't stay there. I want to live in the campo and make things better for the campesinos. This time a year or two from now, like, I should be living in a maize village in El Salvador, raising my family in the jungle. I'm going to marry an indio who builds sustainable farms for la gente. I'm going to teach him and the children how to read and speak English, we're going to grow crops, and build homes, and bring plumbing to the entire village, just like the Peace Corps, except I ain't going to be dependent on no government to help my folks. It will be real raza love. We'll live off the land, and I'll cook pupusas and gallo pinto. And we will only go to the city to sell our harvested organic coffee, and huipiles, like the one I'm wearing now. Except, I won't wear Nikes with it—not if I'm living in the campo. I would have some bombass huaraches made with like...like thick-ass monster truck tire treads in case we had to run from the Army, or the death squad-drug dealers. I would just take off through the jungle in my commando huaraches with my man, and with my baby strapped on my back, with my own strap, an AK-47 for when shit got hectic. Head to the mountains. Straight up guerrilla mujer style, with my familia. We would camp next to the river, far from the road, high in the mountains, close to the sun so we would always have light and never get cold. And if we had to fight, we would fight. I would be a run and gun mujer. Watchame. Revolutionary but gangsta mujerista.

Puchica, man. That's where I belong. The war left me an orphan. Well, in a metaphoric sense. My mother is worried that I'm being naïve for El Salvador. But why can't a woman dream about her perfect partner? My mother says our lives are a hundred times better here. But she wants me to be all American, marry a gavacho, and live in some big house in Walnut Creek, like her and my step-father. Chale! I have to live there now because the rent is free. Don't get me wrong, though. I love my mother like a best friend. I help her whenever she needs me. Like when she wants to gossip. I listen. But what does she know about America, she can barely speak English! She has a travel agency and sells over priced vacations to rich Salvies who go back once a month to check on their properties. Bunch of capitalists. I'm not taking any handouts from my mom, though, either. As soon as I save enough money, I'm giving her back her old Mercedes, and I am moving to la selva!

JACK, *the meth fried poet, or e-way-puta*

I want to tell you how I learned to speak Spanish. Really, I want to tell you how I learned to say E-Way-Puta. Which is a Salvadoran curse, and a cultural philosophy. Later I found out what it literally meant. But that's another story. This one starts at San Francisco State. No. It starts at the Chameleon.

I met a chick at the Chameleon, that dirty bar on Valencia and 19th Street where beer and piss meet punk and poetry. It was after the poetry slam. Some all girl vegan punk band I never heard of before was screaming through their set. They sucked. It was cool. But they didn't play fast enough. We slammed anyway, though. And that's how I met the chick. She was in the pit. Old school Zebra Creepers, plaid pants, suspenders and a Betty Boop T-Shirt. I can't remember her name. Daria, Desiree or Delilah, or something mythological like that. She was tall. And she had cigarettes. We banged into each other in the slam pit, and had a conversation between swinging elbows and slashing kicks. She could hold her own real good. "Hey," she said. "Hey," I said. "I like your hair," she said. "This band sucks," I said. "I liked your poem," she said. "Yeah? You a groupie?" "What?" By the time I had read my piece about how Scientology is responsible for serial killers in the suburbs, I was already so wasted I had almost forgot why I was at the Chameleon, until they called my name to come up on stage and slam a poem. "You like poetry?" I asked. "You remind me of Kurt Vonnegut. Have you ever read Breakfast of Champions?" she asked. "I don't like sports." I smiled at her and then took an elbow in the kidney. I always thought Vonnegut was an underappreciated genius. But I wrote poems. Actually, I got drunk, high and read poems in bars for *scores* from 1-10—so who was I to say if anyone was a genius?

After that, we talked all night from the Chameleon and back to her place. And that's how I ended up at San Francisco State. We must have fallen asleep like at 6AM, because when I woke up it was 10:30 in the morning and someone was blasting Led Zeppelin "Fool in the Rain". I was in an unfolded futon doing the Where-am-I? again. I stood up half blind from a hang over and put my pants on. The rubber I had in my back pocket was depressingly still there. I had talked myself out of sex again. Or snorted myself out of it. Shit. So I stumbled out of her apartment. I mean, it was a dorm room at San Francisco State. Those dorms are a fucking nightmare. Just the smell alone can make you wanna throw up. I didn't know what floor I was on, and I was totally hung over and sick to my stomach, and there must have been huge black circles under my eyes, and maybe I smelled. Probably. I didn't try to shower back at the dorm because who knew if there were roommates or whatever, you know? Anyway, I got out into the hall and saw someone near the elevator, and I was like walking toward her, you know, arms out like The Mummy trying to

get her attention so she could tell me where the hell I was and how to get out. But either I wasn't loud enough, or I looked scary because the chick put her head down and bolted past me. Finally, I caught this Asian dude coming out of the elevator. I could tell he was a student on account of the bulging fifty-pound orange backpack he was wearing. He told me how to get to Muni, but I had to go through campus. It was complicated, and I forgot the directions almost immediately. So I sniffed the rest of my bag from last night in the elevator on the way down, and tried to figure out my trip back to the Mission.

The campus was in a fog. Literally. Everything and everybody looking gray as the morning fog, gray as the old buildings—even the tree trunks looked gray, institutional and fabricated. When I got to the student center plaza people were selling shit all over the place. It must have been like a market day or something. I thought I saw Delilah, or whatever her name was, selling Guatemalan textiles, but I wasn't sure it was her. So I started handling some of the shirts, to check them out, and to get her attention. And finally she turns around to me and tells me the shirts are for women. I don't have a problem wearing women's clothes, I tell her. I've got a couple dresses at home. I like to wear them when I do my rape poem. She said it was cool. But it wasn't like I was going to buy one, anyway. I just wanted to see if I knew the girl. I didn't. Know her. But she starts running down her story to me anyway. About El Salvador and the Civil War. She told me about her mom and her family.

It seems like this always happens to me. I just have one of those faces that people look at and say, I can tell that guy my story. I'm a born listener. Everybody is always running their story down on me. Or maybe it's just San Francisco. No one I know is from here, and most of the time they really want to be somewhere else. New York or LA. That's usually how the story goes with slam poets, musicians, wannabes and students. Which is a paradox for me, because my goal from the time I left St. Louis when I was seventeen—my whole life goal after reading *On The Road* was to come to San Francisco and be a poet. Or die trying. I think I was dying. I mean, I was cool. Broke, but cool. Lonely, but cool. Disappointed, but cool. Confused, but cool. I went to the poetry slam where people would listen to me rant, and mostly agree with me about how everything was so fucked up. We shouted our disillusion with society, and blamed our parents for it. And I had the drugs, and a punk attitude. But I couldn't tell you what a poet's life should be like beyond that. I didn't know. Not yet.

The girl selling the Guatemalan shirts said her name was Ana Popul Vuh. I never heard of a name like that before. But I liked it. It was her code name, or something, to avoid the spies who would kill her if they found out who she really was. She told me it came from the name of the Mayan Creation Myth. With all the mythology in every woman's name I had met the last two days, I started to wonder whether I was living in a fantasy comic book. I told her my name was Jack. Jack the Poet. We already sounded like a couple of super heroes. Ana Popul Vuh and Jack the Poet. But Ana was a real warrior. She had thick long black curls, and huge brown eyes that caught fire when she spoke about El Salvador, the jungle and guerilla warfare, and how she was going to marry a farmer there, and build farms for people in the jungle. Even though she had this valley girl Spanglish accent I never heard before, you could tell she had a purpose. She was determined to do something.

Not like fake, cosmic, pseudo hippy bullshit either. Not no let's all hold hands and paint on each other idea. She had a plan about how she wanted to exist. Like she had it laid out. And then it was like Ana had just built my life into the world as part of her story. Like she birthed me. I was locked into her. Speechless. She was so bright. Ana wasn't just trying to change her past, but *the*

past. And my past was part of the past. My father's Jack Daniel's induced speeches about responsibility and competition while he was embezzling pennies at a time from his clients, and my mother's romance novel and timer taped soap opera oblivion. That wasn't existence. But that was all gonna change. Only I wasn't going back to St. Louis to change anything. I was going to become a poet here in San Francisco. I found the secret. It was how the outside was really a reflection of what was happening on the inside. Shit was disorganized everywhere I looked—outside of Ana. But now I was going to put some fucking order in my life. I was going to figure out what they hell I was doing in San Francisco. I wasn't going to run from my past, but run to it. That's where the poetry was.

Then I got paranoid that there were Salvadoran Civil War spies on their way to get us because now we had something in common. I thought we would draw too much attention. I had to break out. I told Ana where to find me at the Chameleon and asked her how to catch the 26 bus to Valencia Street, and she just pointed the way. I caught a nearly empty bus before noon. There was an old lady riding with me at the very front. She could have been Pilipino. Or she could have been Salvadoran. I couldn't decide whether I should sit in the front or the back of the bus. I didn't want the old lady to ask me any questions. I was afraid I would lose the secret and she might be a spy. So I went to the back of the bus.

I stood near the exit. Almost everyone who boarded looked Salvadoran. Were they spies? Or were they refugees? I was sweating by the time we reached Chenery Street, and then, past the Randall Museum, I started to see the Mission differently. Before a Mexican could have been, well, just a Mexican. And the Mission was full of Mexicans. We had Mexicans in St. Louis, but not as many as San Francisco. I never thought of them as refugees, escaping murderers who burned people in their homes. But now I tried to identify who was from El Salvador. I listened for *E-way-puta*, like Ana had said it. When we got to Mission and 30th, I finally heard it. I turned around and crouched, expecting an assassin. But it was just a bunch of middle school kids skipping school and pushing each other in the back of the bus. E-Way-Puta.

I got off the bus at 16th & Valencia. I stood on the corner a minute letting the sunlight hit my face, feeling lucky to be back home. But home had changed since I met Ana. I was amongst my own now. I was a refugee too. So I kept standing there listening to the Spanish being spoken all around me. Thinking of home, and how now around my home everyone was saying *E Way Puta*. E way puta. E way puta. I wondered how many of them had the same dream Ana did. I didn't know if I would ever use the story in a poem. But now, at least, I could tell you what they were saying. Son of a bitch.

2.

In 1995 a Chinese-American college student
laid a map of San Francisco in front of me
and chopped one hand onto 16th and the other onto 24th Street
framing everything in between like a jewelry box
This is the hippest part of the City, he said.
Bars, clubs, theaters, galleries, cafes, bookstores, restaurants
If you want to be an artist you need to be there.

The Jewelry Box

Mission District flat. A and B on moving day, boxes in the hall and in the major rooms. A finds an old wooden jewelry box that winds a song.

A: Honey, where did you get this?

B: It was my grandmother's.

A: But why do you have it?

B: I don't know why I kept it. My mom asked me if I wanted it. I was going to give it to you. But either I thought you wouldn't want it, or I just forgot. It's just a cheap jewelry box. Do you want it?

A: I just think it's weird you would keep a jewelry box.

B: Yeah. My mom kept it after my grandmother died, and I think she asked me if I wanted it...to give it to you or my daughter—

A: Daughter?

B: If I ever had one.

A: So were you going to give this to me, or to a daughter you had with some other woman?

B: I could not imagine having children with anyone but you.

A: But it was your grandmother's, and it's just laying here in the junk pile like you were going to throw it away. Why didn't you tell me you had it?

B: I told you I forgot.

(pause)

B: It plays a song.

B takes jewelry box, winds it and plays song—Really it's a story about history, family and immigration, over dubbed to Somewhere over the rainbow; or new song comes over the speakers like Lila Downs Mi Corazon me Recuerda.

A: That's nice. What is it?

B: Somewhere over the rainbow.

A: Hmm...What are the words?

B: My grandfather used to sing that song to us when we were kids. My grandmother loved *The Wizard of Oz*. Did you see that movie?

A: Maybe.

B: You would know if you had seen it. It's a classic. It was like one of the biggest musical films ever from like 1939. The cowardly lion, the wicked witch. Dorothy. The red shoes. Toto. The munchkins. You know.

A: Yes, I know what it is. But I never watched it. We didn't watch those kinds of movies when I was growing up.

B: Those kinds of movies? You mean musicals?

A: We only had a few movies at our house that we watched over and over. *Colors*. *Pretty Woman*. *Coming to America*. Me and my sister knew the words to all those movies.

B: You never watched *The Wizard of Oz*? Not even with your mom or grandma?

A: We watched *La Bamba*. I loved the music in it. Los Lobos, I think. Right?

B: That was a good movie. But it wasn't a musical.

A: I cried every time his brother screams "Richie!" Or when they would have fights in the trailer. Do you think our baby will look like Esai Morales?

B: What?

A: I'm just kidding.

B: Did you have a crush on Esai Morales or something? Do you think he's cute?

A: I was thirteen. So what are you going to do with the jewelry box?

B: I was going to throw it away, I guess. I don't want to hold on to extra stuff for the move. The lighter the load the better.

A: You were going to throw something this old away? It's like fifty years old. It was your grandmother's. It has sentimental value. I want it.

B: You do? Really? But you have three jewelry boxes already. And one of them is your grandmother's.

A: So I want this one, too. I can paint it. Make it pretty and colorful. Red or something.

B: Oh yeah. Paint it. Are you sure?

A: Yes.

(pause)

A: What?

B: ...

A: Well?

B winds the box again, and the mysterious song voice continues it's story.

B: I was just trying to remember how the song goes. *Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high.* That's all I can remember, and for some reason my mind wants to sing *You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.*

A: Don't sing that song.

B: I know. That's not it. But for some reason one song reminds me of the other, so they are kind of the same song from my childhood. My grandfather would sing them in his Mexican accent. It was how he learned English, movies and popular songs. He always wanted us to speak English. And then my grandmother would sing, too, in her Cuban accent. *Guey up hiye...* My mom knows the words.

A: No. That song reminds me of my dad. He used to sing it to us twenty years ago, and now he sings it to Carlos. And calls him sunshine. Ugh.

B: Everybody sings that song to their kids. It's a happy song. It's supposed to remind you of your childhood.

(A puts down jewelry box)

A: My father was in prison for five years during my childhood. I was angry. In elementary school I spent a lot of my lunches with a child psychologist playing Uno. You know, the card game? We didn't talk about where my father was, or why he was gone. I was beating up the other kids. That was my reaction to it. And the counselor would come by every day before lunch and take me into her office, and we would sit down and eat lunch and play Uno. No one asked me how I felt about having to visit my dad in prison. Or about what was happening to my mom. We were living on welfare and food stamps the whole time my dad was locked up because no one was working. My mom had five kids to take care of, while my grandma worked part time cleaning people's houses. We were barely able to pay rent, and every day I wondered whether we would have to move again. My childhood sucked.

B: It's all right. Our child will never have to worry about that. He's going to be raised totally secure. No one is going to prison. We're college educated people. We got good jobs. We're leaving the neighborhood so you can feel safe, and so he can be safe. No more homeboys hollering at you when you come back from work. No more addicts nodding out in our doorway. No more gangsters doing drivebys across the street.

A: You mean no more Mexicans, right? We're leaving the Mission, so we're leaving our people to go live in the white neighborhood, and raise our kid with white people. Where he might not get shot by another gang, but he'll be called beaner and wetback until he starts to hate himself enough to wish he was white. Then he'll start acting white, and want to date white girls.

Why are you laughing? Just because all your girlfriends were white, you think your son is going

to date white girls? Hell no, he isn't. I won't let him. He's going to marry a Mexican girl. What? Why are you laughing?

B: I'm laughing because you're impossible. I mean, we have to leave the Mission because it's not safe for you. You said you wouldn't move to Oakland, either. Because your family is scared to come to Oakland and they would never come visit us. The other neighborhood is full of white people. It's like there is no perfect place to live, except...

A: Except where?

B: I don't know. But we're not moving to Manteca or Modesto or Pittsburg, or any suburb just because Mexicans are moving there now. There's no theaters there, no galleries, no grants, no restaurants, no salsa dancing, no cafes. I don't even think people chew gum in Manteca. Just because we're going to have a kid doesn't mean we need to quit being ourselves. I am not going back to the suburbs.

A: I don't want to live there either.

B: We're staying in San Francisco. My son is gonna be raised in San Francisco, even if every Black person and every Mexican person is evicted or moves out. The city can still be his jewelry box. You can still find beautiful things here, even if it's getting gentrified. I found you, didn't I?

A: And you were lucky to find me.

B: Lucky. Or just good timing. Either way, you're mine now.

3.

In 1995 I left the strip mall frozen
yogurt shops, landscaped Shell stations and Pizza Huts
I left the sunshine, life's a beach, haveaniceday smiley face
I left the tract home demos, carports and drive through burger joints
for a plebe who sold tamales on the street,
where three families hung their laundry across the same line
in a concrete backyard to dry

MAX, 16, *working at the Yogurt Barrel, evening.*

Got to work at 3:26:43. It took me thirty-two minutes and twenty-eight seconds to walk to Yogurt Barrel from my house. They call it the Yogurt Barrel because from the outside it looks like a huge yellow and tan barrel. It used to be called the Taco Barrel. Before that it was the Hot Dog Barrel. The owner's nephew is my boss, Juan Carlos. He used to work here when it was Taco Barrel. When I walk in Juan Carlos is pouring a new carton of coconut flavor into the mixer. Some wierd noise comes from between his teeth when he sees me. By the time I put my apron on and my hat it's 3:28:39.

At 3:29:22 Yvette came in. Yvette is my favorite customer. Juan Carlos calls her Bull Dog because he says she has a big head, a round face, a short neck and short arms. I would never call

her Bull Dog. She has long, straight brown hair with blond streaks, or whatever. She used to go to Modesto High last year, but now she works at the golf course. Her uniform is a dark blue Polo shirt and white pants, even when it's hot. And she wears perfume. It's so strong, sometimes it puts me in a trance and I just want to like stare at her. HA-HA! I make a small frozen yogurt swirl of strawberry and coconut with chocolate sprinkles for Yvette in two minutes and seventeen seconds. While I'm holding it some of it dripped on my hand.

Hey, Max. Hey. 3:34:57. Do you think I should add fresh fruit to this? I think it might be healthier if I ate it with real strawberries or blueberries instead of chocolate sprinkles. Is it fattening like this? Umm. Ahh. No. 3:35:51 Who cares, anyway, right? Duh. I mean, it's all good. And I should have what's good, right? You're cool, Max. Thanks. Bye. Bye.

Some strawberry yogurt on my left pointer finger, between the first two knuckles, and on my middle finger. She didn't say anything about it dripping, though. I lick it off after she leaves. 3:37:22. Do her fingers taste like mines did? She was here a total of seven minutes and fifteen seconds. The longest Yvette's ever been in Yogurt Barrel on my shift when there wasn't a line.

Juan Carlos is laughing while he wipes down the glass the counter. How come you like Yvette? She's Mexican, OBVIOUSLY, and you white. Guerito. I got dirty blond hair, like my dad. Juan Carlos still has a accent. *Oye guerito. Watcha esa guera. Don't jew want to get to know her better so jew can make more guero babies?* Sometimes he also mixes up "sh" and "ch". He says shicken and chower. HA-HA! Shh. CHut up. HA-HA! Juan Carlos calls me other names, too. Cracker Barrel. Vanilla Ice. Maximiliano Prince of Austria. He's just kidding. He knows my mom is Mexican. She comes in all the time to see me, too. It makes me nervous when she comes, though. Juan Carlos looks at her funny. He smiles at her and offers her a free yogurt. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Charles. What flavor of jogurt are you in the mood for today? May I suggest something for jew?" HA-HA! But I don't like that.

I never told Juan Carlos I liked Yvette. You like her because you check jer watch a lot when cheese here. Like you nervous. I'm not nervous. I like to know how long things take to do. I've been wearing a watch since I was six. I never take it off. I can take a shower in three minutes and six seconds. I can eat a Quarter Pounder in one minute and thirty-three seconds—when I'm really hungry. It takes me seven minutes and eighteen seconds to tie my shoes. But I'm getting better on that one. It used to take me close to ten minutes. Just to tie one shoe! HA-HA! At least, I don't need to wear Velcro shoes anymore.

For like six years I had the same watch. But now I like this one. I just got it for my seventeenth birthday. I could've got either a 1975 Mercury Cougar that my dad had in the garage for twelve years that he was fixing up for me. But I don't have my license. My mom won't let me get one. So I got this watch. It's an Armitron with an extra large digital face that's water resistant up to 165 feet, and a stopwatch that reads 1/100 of a second. I like watching time more than anything else. Except, maybe, Yvette. I time myself all day at work. How long it takes to make a small, a medium and large yogurt. How long it takes to mop, clean the mixer, prep the toppings, dump the trash. How long I can hold my breath with yogurt in my mouth. I don't really try to beat the clock. I just want to know how long it takes. My mom had me tested by a therapist to see if I have autism. They can't decide if it's autism or something else.

Dinner break is at 6:02:34. I walk to 7-11 three doors down in twenty-six seconds. Samy, my neighbor across the street, who's Chaldean, is working at the register. I say hey to him, and get

nachos with chile con carne sauce, four jalapeños and a Big Gulp. Samy doesn't ring me up, though. Another Chaldean guy tells him to go sweep and stock the refrigerators, and he takes my money. 6:08:18. I eat by the Shell station and sit on the white mini wall by the mowed lawn and flowers. It's busy and people are filling up for Friday night parties. It smells like gas and cow manure. Modesto always smells like gas and cow manure.

I can see the entire mall from here. People going in and out of the stores, the 7-11, the taco shop next to it, the Chinese food place, the Pizza Piazza, The Turf Club bar for golfers who want to get drunk, the Beauty and Nail shop, the Yogurt Barrel, the Photo & Mail Express, and then Save Mart. I tried to work there but they didn't hire me because on the personality test, I marked that I would not report someone who I knew was stealing. I hate snitches. HA-HA!

Some guy at the Shell Station, filling up a yellow Mustang is wearing a cowboy hat and blasting House of Pain. Two other dudes get out of the car. One throws out a bunch of Taco Bell bags, and another tosses empty beer cans into the trashcan near the pump. They play basketball with the beer cans. There must be twelve. I think they play sports at my school. They miss most of their shots. Terry with the Taco Bell bags wants to go to a party in Turlock because the chicks are easier over there, especially the Mexican ones. And he wants to teach Yvette a lesson. She shouldn't make him wait so long to give it up. He made first team last year. Who wants to go to Turlock for a party? Too many towel heads over there. Let's stay in the Mo. Yvette doesn't care about you, Terry. No, but your sister does. My sister's six years old, fucker. You want me to make you swallow this gas hose? I bet I could run faster than your piece of shit car. Yeah, I bet you could after you ate all those beans. Run for the border, beanboy. Hey, aren't you that retarded kid? Yeah. That's the kid who wore velcro shoes till he was like fifteen. Because he can't tie his shoes. Now he can. He's retarded. My grandpa wears velcro shoes and he's in a wheelchair. Hey, Rain Man, are you retarded? Can you win us money in Black Jack? 6:25:49

I stand in front of the nail shop window. Two women with big maroon colored hair and fat ankles get their toes washed in green water, and then painted by Asian ladies with doctor's masks over their mouth. I think one of the Asians is a man. I pretend I have a doctor's mask on. I can't smell anything. Not the gas or the cow manure. 6:29:50. Back to the Yogurt Barrel. My mom is inside talking to Juan Carlos. He's leaning over the counter with his chin in his hand. He's chewing gum and his head bobs up and down while he listens. She's waving her hand in the air like a flamenco dancer. I just don't know why he would forget to deposit his checks. It's 6:31:01. I'm late back from my break. Can you believe I found four checks? One of them is from three months ago. I'm trying to think about what I did between here and putting on my doctor's mask. He has a bank account. He has money in his account. I've taken him to the bank several times, and he knows how to use the ATM. They're still good, right? Can you cash them for him? My doctor's mask is still on. 6:33:45. No, señora. Eez like four hundred something dollars. We don't have that much in the register. Why don't you take them to the bank tomorrow? It says void after 60 days. But you can't void them. You know my son has autism, right? It takes my mom two seconds to say the word autism. She says ahhhhhtism. My mijo is a good worker. You know that Juan Carlos. He's worked here for over six months. He's never late. He's always on time. He works hard. If he was irresponsible, your uncle would not hire him, right? Señora, you are right. He is a good worker. Ahhhhhhhhtismmmmm. Mijo, what are you doing right there, standing like a ghost? You scared me. 6:37:03. I give my mom a hug. My doctor's mask is gone. She smells good. Like rose water and baby powder. Did you eat dinner, mijo? I came to see if you wanted to have dinner together. But Juan Carlos said you went already. I should have come earlier. Mom. Yes, baby. What's Black Jack? What, honey? Black Jack. It's a game, baby. A

card game. For gamblers. Why? Do you want to play cards? I want to learn how to play Black Jack. These guys asked me if I could play. What guys? From school. I want to learn. No you, don't honey. It's a scam. You'll lose your money.

4.

In 1995 I came to the Mission
looking for Nicholas Guillén
Cuban poet Negro Bembón
Frida Khalo's real international city
I found Roque Dalton
Pobrecita Poeta Que Era Yo
dogeared at some homeless librarian's sidewalk sale

D. Librarian Black Woman

5.

I found a barrio with open windows
pouring el león de la salsa onto the sidewalk,
Sé que tu no quieres que yo a ti te quiera
Siempre tu me esquivas de alguna manera
A barrio where a taste of cool can be consumed
in the fruit stands where licuados are made
with fresh jugo de mango
and limes are sold twenty-five for a dollar
Si te busco por aquí, me sales por allá
Lo único que yo queiro, no me hagas sufrir más, tu verás
La-la-le, le-lo-lie

E. A dancer. In love.

6.

I came to the Mission looking for a mestizo public
who would acknowledge my Spanglish
and found Alfonso Texidor
holding court at Café La Boheme
spinning lanyards of smoke and poetry
about Reagan and Bush contra Ortega y Castro

F. A Café Junkie white dude

7.

I came to the Mission looking for a smile out of exile
and found a street fiesta with capoeira circles
Paletas y pan dulce sweeten the breeze
between the trees with white painted trunks
whose branches romantically touched
The top of storefronts leaves caressed
windows on second story apartments
Naturally shaded walkway arches
for the old country stroll with a new girl

G. Two girls, emigrés, Uruguay & Panama

8.

I came looking for Juana Alicia's mural of lettuce pickers
and found them faded,
leaning against the wall of Taqueria San Francisco
stooping to collect the cans from last night's seis
Ora' primos, I don't have any money,
but I can spit you a rhyme,
a poem about nuestro barrio and brown pride.
Are you crazy?
Neighborhood is gone to shit, they said.
Have you seen my meds?

H. A trio: Three Meds, devilish

9.

I found my audience reading
cowrie shells, cascara and copal smoke
the superstitious signals for the best direction
to take out of the city
Preparations for the new road
Road old the was
People same the see
Going are you while coming
Cry is do you all and
Poetry more write you
Lloraras y lloraras sin nadie que te consuele
Asi te daras de cuenta que si te engañan duele
Ah-la-la-la,le-lo-lai

I. A member from the audience – non-verbal. Old woman.

10.

Put on a ceremonial dress
Proceed with the last dance
Latinos are leaving San Francisco
But we carry our home with us
In our skin, in our passion, in our music
So pray for guidance
And if you look back don't regret it
You're going to cry, but that's expected
I came to the Mission looking for an audience
Now when I walk through the neighborhood
I only see tourists

J. A tourista dancing Aztec, begins zany, ends existential.

11.

Lloraras, lloraras, lloraras
Josúe and his mother got owner move-in evicted
out their Section 8 apartment on Bryant & 20th
Lloraras
Josúe used to walk a pitbull by my house
and paint poets in B-Boy poses in his basement studio
Lloraras
They had to move to the Bayview.
Until his brother took a bullet two blocks from where they stayed
Lloraras
Now they live in Oakland
and their old apartment is some graphic designer's live/work loft
Lloraras
His mother is a missionary who commutes everyday
to care for the homeless refugees from El Salvador
Lloraras
San Francisco, I stopped believing in you
Tu no tienes sentimiento, tu no tienes corazón
Lloraras
I came to the Mission looking for warmth and embrace
Now I know the sun doesn't shine for everyone

K. The Pit Bull (A hybrid of sexiness, ferocity & wisdom)

12.

Latinos are leaving San Francisco
But we carry our home with us
In our skin, in our passion, in our music
So pray for guidance
And if you look back don't regret it
You're going to cry, but that's expected
I came to the Mission looking for an audience
Now when I walk through the neighborhood
I only see tourists

L. The Shadow turning into the light.

YOU'RE GONNA CRY (PART II), Or, Not Guantanamo

1997

Used to walk down 24th St. in starched Dickies and black wingtips, long sleeve guayabera and Che Guevara beard, kept my Delicados cigarettes in a modified Altoids tin Aztec Parrot made for me after a summer mani krudo kung fu jazz poetry seminar with Juan Felipe Herrera, sometimes I wore a straw hat because 24th was an urban rain forest of howler monkey madres and indigo butterfly kids that kept the mestizo mentals brewing new poems, Spanglish philosophies and folkloric hip-hop festivals I would one day serve la comunidad, a handmade leather bag with an indigenous sun emblem I bought in San Cristobal de las Casas strapped across my chest held my first manuscript of poems and bilingual books by Roque Dalton and Claribel Alegría taught me to listen for Central American *loros* in the lavanderias or panaderias, pero siempre trucha for the garrotes of the chota because I was Chicano and there were narcs en la esquina in front of Taqueria El Farolito on Alabama in Niners jackets with crew cuts trying to blend in then pinch fools over colors or some weed or yay, but I never got my stuff that way, thinking I was a quasi intellectual, Mission communist Chicano, hip-hop grunge poeta, even though I was just another southern Califas-SF State transplant at Latino studies camp, entonces, pues I was on my way to El Balazo Gallery to read poems for a show by the urban indigenous New York futurist nomad mystic painter Doze Green, or to El Centro del Pueblo to throw down some verses, word descarga with Los Delicados when there were five of us banging poetry for Roberto Vargas, Alejandro Murguía and Piri Thomas, we had to show the veteranos that the new school had fire and soul, Magdalena Monterrosa and La Unabomber on stage with us, machetes in their voices, Norman Zelaya and Jimmy Biala caught in the cone of bata drums and sacrificial prayer dance for the huracán our generation was bringing down or drowning in the crosscurrent of racist Sacramento Orange County proposition backlash, We're not heathens, We're just hungry, Vaya! said Piri. Punto. Pass the tamales, the arroz con frijoles, the pan dulce, la yerba buena y chocolate caliente, the readings never paid, but always had good comida and I never saw a plato I couldn't eat, this is how I met the pueblo, the poetas, pandilleros and paleteros, the mothers, the students, the sons and daughters who became my audience, poetry and a tamalada spread was how I crossed the wrinkle in time from the Chicano movement of the 70s to the Central American solidarity movements of the 80s to the y tú, qué? Nineties, before I got a cell phone and a laptop, before I joined the spoken word executive committees, I was just a poet, a physically large poet, a monster poet, perhaps one of the tallest poets in San Francisco, but even Jack Hirschman didn't believe I had once played minor league baseball with the Chicago Cubs, I was looking to regain that swagger, hit the mythological curveball on a consistent basis, not choking, but choking up, hearing my grandmother's voice singing Como fue, building a foundation of clave in my vertebrae, reuniting myself with my immigrant, on a mission to meet my inner voice on stage, amplified

Are You Doing That Crow Bar Thing?

For Juan Felipe Herrera

For all the developers, business merchants, residential builders association members, and the Mission Anti-displacement Coalition

For Norman Zelaya

Are you doing that crow bar thing?

Liquid thing, 16th St. corridor crawl thing, that grimy thing

That thing about being hip without trying, that whole ironic thing

About telling him, telling her, telling us, telling them that we

must clean up the Mission because cool people need a cool place to drink thing

A lookin for a good time thing, an I'm tired of the Marina thing

A polaroid crack head and prostitute thing, a hispters in the dicey barrio thing

An it's just like the Lower East Side thing, an authentic graffiti on the front door thing,

A hot music and cool Dj thing

An opportunistic—I mean optimistic thing, a can't you see the benefits of green spaces and bike lanes thing

Besides, how could gentrification be violent if artists started it?

A look in the mirror thing, a being real thing, a really real with my shit thing

An Eastern European immigrant ghetto fabulous thing because Ukrainians were the black people of Europe thing

A slumlord thing, an exploitation thing, a my girlfriend is Latina, so I can't be racist thing A

bootstraps thing, a new hole in the wall to discover thing because tourists need places to slum, too, thing.

Are you doing that crow bar thing?

The cash in your Oracle stock and buy a bar in the Mission thing

The protect your investment even if it means displacement thing

The it's not personal, it's just business thing

The just trying to live the American dream thing

The White man's burden thing

The new sheriff in town thing

The show em your gun thing

The black eye thing

The violence and destitution is sexy thing

The civilize the savages thing

The cross and crowbar thing

The vigilante thing

The Arnold Schwarzenegger thing

Are you doing that crow bar thing?

That I am an American thing

That snitch to la migra when you can't stand your Latino clients or employees thing

That drug dealers, prostitutes and Mexicans all belong together thing

That electronic hate mail thing

That reverse racism thing

That hijole thing
That no mames thing
That que tu esperabas, guey, thing
That Mexican beer is better at room temperature thing
That destroy your own hood thing
That Rodney King thing
That it wasn't anything till I made it popular thing
That Glikshtern club hopping immigrant crowbar bashing thing

Are you doing that crow bar thing?

Doing the forget about the Centro del Pueblo thing
Doing the volunteer at The Pirate Store instead thing
Doing the post-Chicano thing because I'm not political, I'm an artist thing
Doing the more green spaces thing because murals don't prevent violence thing
Doing the bike lane thing because lowriders aren't ecologically beneficial thing
Doing the save the whales thing because my parents graduated from college thing
Doing the indie rock heroin overdose thing because hip-hop is misogynistic thing
Doing that back to the 80s thing because I got bigger fish to fry so I gotta get mine thing
Doing the righteous thing because sometimes immigrants deserve to get beat in the head with a crow bar thing

Are you doing that crow bar thing?

Liquid thing, 16th St. corridor crawl thing, that grimy thing
That thing about being hip without trying, that whole ironic thing
About telling him, telling her, telling us, telling them that you
Just don't understand gentrification because without us the Mission would just be another slum

Besides, how could gentrification be violent if artists started it?

Nueva Bohemia

From 24th & Portrero to 16th & Valencia, orange and white
U-Hauls disembark. Nuevo Mission bohemians
unload IKEA red rugs and Japanese toys; squeezing
Brady Bunch furnishings up two flights.

They are at home in the heart of York Street,
on Hampshire, Bryant, Alabama, Treat and Capp;
At home with a twelve pack of Tecate
on the stoop, antique Schwinn bicycles with small seats
and the Rolling Stones on the CD player
They are at home

in our neighborhood

They will smoke Pall Mall cigarettes and set up a retro couch
on the sidewalk, drink more Tecate while
Shwinns graduate to Vespas, trucker mesh caps to
white belts and black jeans, Rolling Stones to the Go-Go's.
Nostalgia tears through their vocal chords like a hiccup.
We got
The beat.
We got the
Beat
We
Got the beat
Everybody get up and
Sing
Evan, Casey, Brian, Jen, Charlene, Zack,
All stand up and walk down the street to Pop's
corner dive bar, leaving the couch
and empty beer cans on the sidewalk

they are singing

Just across the street, up the block a few
houses, above the garage and Lydia's purple Camero
with Martinez airbrushed on the rear window,
we are waving a sign out the second floor,
having our own party, a celebration after nine months of
fighting the landlord, court orders, letters to pro bono lawyers,
a finality, a sentence in an empty 2 bedroom apartment, where I wrote
my first novel on my desk in the living room, which was also my
bedroom, where I pinned six bounced checks on the wall
for inspiration while I wrote, where Jaime watched cartoons
and brought his plate of chorizo con huevo y platano maduro
to eat in front of the Giants game, sometimes while I typed,

where Lydia and her boyfriend danced a spot light bolero
at every party, except this one, listening to Hector Lavoe Todo Tiene Su Final,
Nada Dura Para Siempre, Tenemos Que Recordar Que
No Existe Eternidad, singing to them across the street, waving the sign
Lydia painted on a dusty bed sheet that she also used as a curtain,
gripping a corner of the sheet with purple and yellow paint, just like her car,
WE ARE BEING EVICTED, in one hand and a bottle of Flor de Caña
in the other, Fuck it. This place is full of jive turkeys now.
Jaime is singing the loudest. There were four of us including
Lydia's boyfriend, Angel, who lived in the pad that tomorrow
will supposedly be occupied by the landlord and his cousin from Michigan
but we know he wants us out so he can triple the rent.
Just like Don Eduardo down the block, who put a down payment on a house
in Antioch from the deposit he got from the nuevo bohemians.
Where will we go? Will anyone sing for us?

Mission Street Mantra

*Early in the morning/before you eat your breakfast
You gotta get down....*

It's nine in the morning/the markets are brewing
Mission Street is teaming like turtle stew

Early in the morning/the jones for action gets the people moving
Wheeling and dealing makes them feel high

I get down from 24th and Bryant to 16th and Valencia
Quibole, primo/Super cool, primo/Ay te watcho, primo

En mi barrio a todo le puedes encontrar
El gringo no entiende por qué hay tanta raza
Pero no le hagas caso
Metate lo tuyo
Porque todavía hay lugar

Early in the morning/before you eat your breakfast
You gotta get down

If super cool is your pleasure/and you want to find something better
You gotta get down

We live in the shadows, a community
Where children play on a creaky gate
Here families and bohemians disappeared
Almost overnight

Mexicanos, Centro Americanos swing
to the sounds of revolving iron
the CLACK-CLACK of pins and boots

Flow with no top or bottom
In this process of globalization
you've go to take
the good the bad and the ugly
with gentrification

So walk with your head up/else folks might treat you rough
You could get beat for the cap you wear

Because this is the Mission/where blood feeds the concrete dreams of immigration
And reality is a crime around here

You're Gonna Cry

Leaving behind a black thread of asphalt tied to San Francisco's international orange doorknob, the poet pied piper of the Chicano hormiga supernova rolls through the northern vineyards in his '66 Chevy, bumping the new Jay Z, windows up, as the temperature outside the city limits climbs twenty-five degrees.

Roll the windows down and breathe the fields in early summer glory. He sees crosses in the peach orchards, crosses in the grape vines, crosses in the strawberry fields. In cow pastures and beneath water towers roadside turkey vultures hold their court over the right to bear arms. Stigmata of service and rejection where martyrs became co-opted by Apple Inc. and then forsaken while the suburbs became the city.

He knows what he will find in Santa Rosa. The same thing he found in Pittsburg, in Modesto and Vallejo. Barrio youth that used to live in section 8 apartments in the Mission of San Francisco forced out/back the way their parents came when they immigrated. Used to participate in the inner city summer art camp. Used to take samba, capoeira, and paper mache classes at the cultural center. Were on their way as future artistas of la galeria de la raza. Could have continued emblazoning murals of peace over the City's amplified homicide statistics, and increased the documentary videos of youth dignity. But now they reside in a low-income housing complex in Santa Rosa's Apple Valley.

Here the poet pied piper of the Chicano hormiga supernova will find sixteen ambivalently suspicious young raza faces ringed with government subsidized detritus of orange hot cheetos to rock his rhymes. Sixteen pre-teens, tweeners, and teenagers, plus a few adult supervisors, barely eighteen but wiser beyond their years, sit in a rough cut circle, synthesized and edited into a municipal trailer crammed with a foosball table and broken down computers, a big screen stereo surround sound TV with a Playstation connection and Wii handy, low rider and tattoo graphics pinned to the blue upholstered trailer wall recounting the teenage promises carried over with the confused geography of gang loyalties from back home.

This is a tiny suburban housing project rec center fifty miles from the Mission and I'm the poet trying not to show less than a professional touch. This is my first day of a residency that's supposed to last a month. It's hard to imagine how an MFA I'm still paying for got me this far. But after driving for an hour I don't have time to think how I feel a little depressed about the surroundings of my stage and audience, so I project an alter-ego everybrownman superhero character and start to bust. Not knowing how many speak Spanish or English. I trust when they hear something in either one, they'll let it be known whether they like it or not. Then mouth holes drop like dominos into laughter, confusion, boredom and astonishment over thirty minutes of spoken Spanglish Bay Area love notes delivered in mesmerizing rhythm and flavor. They want to recite my lyrics with me so the heavy metal and professional wrestling fans ask me, How you do that? They tell me to do it again, Represent, Representa!

But my purpose isn't just a performance to watch. So we make dialogue out of it. I ask them to write about the difference between how the world sees them and how they see themselves by comparing their identities to day and night, and then excuse myself to use the restroom, come to find out it's a port-a-potty outside around back. The city hasn't fixed the bathrooms in the trailer for over a month, and I wonder how they had money to pay for my presentation but not repair the toilets. Needless to say the port-a-potty is shitty, smeared and wack. I can't use it. No wonder out

of a project of six hundred residents only sixteen youth came to hear me rap. Outside I stare through a large hole in the chain link fence, and past the train tracks a pair of grape pickers carrying Kendall-Jackson sacks piss under a tree. But I decide not to act in accordance and wait until the second hour is up so I can drive away to relieve myself. I slowly walk back into the trailer more determined to hear what my writers came up with.

Rosie says, “By day I am a momma polar bear on the melting ice and home is further and further away. My father got stopped by ICE again on the way home from work yesterday. They asked for his license in Spanish, and then his citizenship in English. They would have took his car if he’d been driving without his license. He knows never to leave home without it. But I was born in San Francisco. No one there ever stopped me or my family for being Latino. When my dad lost his job painting houses we couldn’t afford to stay. Now he drives a truck for Kendall-Jackson, and we live in Rosetown. But I ain’t no trailera. I used to play the clarinet at International Studies Academy, but now I can’t concentrate. I’m just not sure how I fit. Everyone thinks we’re immigrants. But we can’t be deported. The boys here are rude and when I wear blue to school they call me a scrap. By day I am knocking Tupac hard in my Nano headphones. I can’t take this country life shit. I went from hip-hop thugs to cowboys in rat skin boots. By night I sing the blues to my friends on Myspace. I don’t study my math or history. Instead I download ringtones to personalize my cell phone, and daydream about when we can move back to San Francisco. I might have to repeat 9th grade. I’m not dumb, there’s just no one to talk to.”

When she reads it out loud there’s a discomfort across the board of faces playing bored but betraying an unfortunate feeling of guilt, or anxiety at being the next one called to read. Not everyone comes as honest as Rosie, but most see a need to express anger and frustration with their identity. Some struggle with writing in English. A few laugh it off with gangster fronts of “Oh, that’s gay.” and “Why you crying?” trying to tell me they don’t care. But I know mythologizing their reality is the only way some can deal with the fact dad is prison and mom can’t read. Is it just young people’s angst, or is it a cultural creep? Before our rites of passage were junior high crushes, sports and weed. Now it’s claiming sets, sex and ecstasy, juvenile hall and ICE raids, all before you turn thirteen. And that’s when I make everyone stand in a circle to stretch their voice. First we whisper, then we scream.

On the way back to the City the dome of the SF Palace of Fine Arts preens a red terra cotta monument of classic Western accomplishment. I realize there’s no protection from feeling like poverty awaits you. Even though right now you may have a home there is still no guarantee someone isn’t scheming to take it all away. We may not like it but they stuck us in this predicament together, citizens and immigrants chasing the American Dream. Even though we got different issues, we take different avenues, we end up dumped in the same housing project, classroom, prison cell, parking lot and lettuce field, with little to no way out. The poet pied piper of the Chicano hormiga supernova is no exception. Blueprint of who his audience is, whether they come from the theater, the café, the parking lot or the fields. But the price of gas is going higher, and the people are being spread out further from the center. I gotta get a map of suburbia and hope that BART will soon reach Santa Rosa.

Rolling Your *RRR*'s: The New Myth of Literacy

Poetry is a lazy man's excuse not to work. Lately, Chicano poets are opening business accounts, amassing frequent flier miles, publishing books and earning money for their work.

Chicano poets wake up at noon, gather the quarters and dimes scattered around the ashtray, pull a pen out from underwear waistband and write a verse about the wine stained moon, and the divine muscles of Quetzalcoatl using words like bulbous and vacío. They visit each other's Mission District apartments, drink mescal and smoke cigarettes, intensely reciting poems to each other, listen to War, Lila Downs and Hector Lavoe, until they decide to get high and flail through a game of basketball or a game of tennis at Dolores Park in their Levi's. Their mothers support them with cell phones and monthly stipends, which they blow on top-shelf tequila and rum, and organic food that they never share with anyone. Their hair always looks "slept on," not professionally stylized, but shaven or unwashed under a Kangol cap. They hang out at the Elbo Room on salsa night but only dance at intermission because they came to watch the band. They go to La Rondalla to get drunk on cheap margaritas and argue about artistic intention, immigration policy and white people. They sing rancheras at the bar and dance with the old drunks. They read poems at Café International and Galería de la Raza on Friday nights. They are not to be trusted howling their suffering on the mic and panting their ecstasies in a slow jam DJ voice, or painting their lovers like grand prize cups and baiting your sympathy by criticizing the bourgeoisie, hypocritical social order that treats all poets like whining mommas' boys, even the feminists. Especially the feminists.

Because no one has the time to listen to a Chicano narrate her culture's extinction, document the simultaneous attraction and repulsion to her own kind whose skepticism becomes contempt for any Latino claiming a paycheck without breaking his back, or breaking the law, who unlocks the mysteries of Spanglish for those who can't read English and can't speak Spanish, but who can throw a mean ass party/pachanga even the gringos appreciate the enchiladas, the guacamole, the margaritas as long as we don't call it cuisine. Because Mexican food should be cheap—just like our labor. Invisibility and servitude pass for acceptance. Whether we're dishwashers, gangsters or poets challenging the gatekeepers and our familia's bigots, you're still a traitor, or a faggot, so stay quiet. Write herstory because my mother was the only one who truly believed in me. Write and don't give up until you sell your work for what it's worth, even if you feel like sometimes you're writing in invisible ink. It may not translate to a six-figure bank account, but I make enough to pay my rent and take my girlfriend out.

Can we write a grant to fund a Chicano poet laureate? Will we ever chisel the chip on our shoulder into a refined accent of cultural confidence and American Idol grace? Who will remember what a Chicano is when we stop writing about our oppression? Who will pronounce the birth of new heroes? Who will create the new myth of us?

It's obvious we love our people. It doesn't matter if you love the poets. We will knife fight over our women's beauty, take pride in the creativity of a tough lowrider, sing with the children who laugh at the word huevo. This might never change. We also stand up awestruck when Barry Bonds hits a homerun, and seem something cruel and unusual about Martha Stewart in prison. Still, when it's time to pass a law, build a new theater, or raise funds for legal fees, poets volunteer our blood, sweat and poems to get it done. Not many brown communities have a public theater or an arts foundation. The Chicano poet stands humble and ready in an apartment complex parking lot fifty miles outside the City, surrounded by food stamp families barbecuing

government issue hot dogs, autoshop mechanics with grease still marking their caras, amongst City Parks and Rec officials snapping photos of malnourished kids playing water balloon toss and mommas counting their raffle tickets, TV cameras rolling for a documentary about literacy in the projects, a lesbian DJ playing Oakland hyphe on iPod decks and lil homies doing a kick back on their lowrider Schwinn, one eye out for the migra, the other peeping for rivals on the creep. Here is the Chicano poet's stage, court, trust and sentry. It may not always be this way. Once he begins to perform, the wheel in the sky will spin a new destiny.