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Save my Sins for Sunday

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SAVE MY SINS FOR SUNDAY

A Thesis

by

GABRIEL LEAL

Submitted to the Graduate College of
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2016

Major Subject: Creative Writing

SAVE MY SINS FOR SUNDAY

A Thesis
by
GABRIEL LEAL

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May 2016

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ABSTRACT

Leal, Gabriel, Save My Sins for Sunday. Master of Fine Arts (MFA), May, 2016, 77 pp., references, 19 titles.

This is a collection of poetry that depicts the struggles of family separation, to the street and drug life, to the questioning of faith and religion, to the revelation that education was the only means of escape. Set in the Rio Grande Valley, this collection allows the reader to travel through the rough streets of South Texas where anger, pain, and joy coincide. Embedded in a Tex-Mex voice, I take you through my experiences that allowed me to see that there was no future for me in the streets and that I would rather be institutionalized by universities, rather than prisons.

DEDICATION

My dedication to my studies would have not been possible without the tough love and support of my mother Anna Luisa Leal, who I have shared my most personal pieces of writing with. My mother never gave up on me, although we outlived a very rough relationship, I would have given up if she didn't believe that I was capable of achieving great things. My father, Isidro Leal for being there as I drove through the darkest paths. My brother, Isidro "Sid" Leal Jr., who everyday gave me reason for wanting to live. My stepmother, Darla Leal for always having an open ear and understanding of my struggles.

Lastly and most importantly, my wife, Lizette Berenice Leal. She is just like my mother and I hate it, but she has always kept me together. I love you for believing in me during the times I fail to believe in myself.

Maya Alessandra Fuentes—daddy loves you.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|---|------|
| ABSTRACT..... | iii |
| DEDICATION..... | iv |
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS..... | v |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS..... | vi |
| CHAPTER I. BREAKING OUT OF LIFE IN MY CONCRETE CUBE..... | 1 |
| Divorcing Love: The Craft of a Careless Life..... | 2 |
| The Meaning of Life: My Struggles Breaking Away from the Streets..... | 11 |
| Writing & Realization: A Poet, Scholar, Husband, Teacher, & Son..... | 20 |
| CHAPTER II. POEMS..... | 32 |
| Life in My Concrete Cube..... | 32 |
| CHAPTER III. DIVORCING LOVE..... | 34 |
| Truck on Elm Street..... | 34 |
| Divorcing Love..... | 37 |
| Freshman to the 3 rd Degree..... | 39 |
| Cascos..... | 40 |
| Running..... | 42 |
| Help Homeboy..... | 43 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Mi Río Grande Barrio..... | 44 |
| Bombs Away..... | 46 |
| In the Dark of a Lonely Day..... | 47 |
| Sacred Heart..... | 48 |
| King Mexican-Seed meets Texas-Soil..... | 49 |
| Una Vista del Valle..... | 51 |
| Rock on the Rio Grande..... | 52 |
| The Backs of Broken Browns..... | 54 |
| El Mojado vs. White America..... | 55 |
| CHAPTER IV. BREAKING AWAY FROM THE STREETS..... | 56 |
| The Beauty of the Blossom..... | 56 |
| Before Bliss..... | 57 |
| Another Sin Saved for Sunday..... | 59 |
| The Cruci-fiction of Christ..... | 60 |
| Windows Nailed Shut..... | 61 |
| How will you live when you die?..... | 62 |
| I kneel and ask the sky where heaven is found..... | 64 |
| Prayer for God’s Earth..... | 65 |
| My Sins. My Sanity..... | 66 |
| The Metal Fangs of Matrimony..... | 67 |
| An Ocean Full of Dicks and Docks..... | 68 |
| Teaching Fish How to Swim..... | 69 |
| Natural Toxicity of Love..... | 70 |

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| Procrastination..... | 71 |
| New Friends. New Life..... | 72 |
| Happy Home..... | 73 |
| Cleansing Bad Relationships..... | 74 |
| REFERENCES..... | 75 |
| BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH..... | 77 |

CHAPTER I

BREAKING OUT OF LIFE IN MY CONCRETE CUBE: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO SAVE MY SINS FOR SUNDAY

Good and bad things have occurred. But the good—young people changing their lives, the growth of organized urban peace efforts, the expansion of spiritual-based practices and the intensifying debate on how to address violence in this country—have far outweighed the bad.

Luis J. Rodríguez, “The Long Run: New Introduction to Always Running”

I never thought that writing would change my life. Growing up I had a happy childhood when my parents were together. We always went to places like Sea World, Fiesta Texas, and Schlitterbahn every time my parents had time off work. I was 13 when my parents got divorced and my life started to change. This was the beginning of my many visits to city and county jails. I didn't care about getting in trouble. I felt as if I didn't have to care since my parents didn't care about keeping our family together. Even when my parents were together, my father was a truck driver, so for the most part he was only home weekends. My mother worked for the City of Pharr, the standard eight to five, five days a week. My brother Sid and I lived in Alamo with my grandparents until after first grade because we were too young to be left home alone. As a teen I couldn't find meaning in my life. My experiences joining a gang, hurting my family, being stabbed, and being locked up have allowed me to find a purpose. This poetry collection aims to depict the pains that stemmed from divorce, my struggles with street and drug life, the

importance of my education, and the tragedies and triumphs in becoming a loving husband, son, father, and dedicated instructor for first year college students. I have organized my collection of poems into chronological themes focused on divorce, street life, and purpose in life. This is an introduction to what each life stage means to me, interpreted through poetry.

Divorcing Love: The Craft of a Careless Life

The effects divorce had on my life are depicted in “Truck on Elm Street.” This poem is important to my collection because of the absence of my father, his insecurities, and the lack of support for my parents’ marriage from his family which eventually led to their divorce. By consequence, this also resulted with me learning Spanish, since my brother Sid and I spoke only English with my parents. Sid and I were raised by our grandparents, who only spoke Spanish, so I had to learn the language in order to communicate with them. This is the purpose behind using Spanish when addressing my grandparents, as I associate the language with them in my memories.

We lived in Pharr,

but I was raised to fight or fall in Alamo.

Mi granpa era trabajador,

helped stab stone stakes

in the bottom of La Laguna Madre

to hold up Queen Isabella’s Causeway

so we could cross from Port Isabel

to South Padre Island.

Spanish was a language I was unfamiliar as a child and I would have never learned the language if it weren't for my grandparents. I never felt comfortable using Spanish in my poems, but it has always been a part of me, so I feel it is important to authenticate my voice in my poetry. "Truck on Elm Street," also shows the close relationship my brother and I shared. After first grade we switched schools. We went from Farias Elementary in Alamo to Dan Ramirez in Pharr, so we no longer stayed with our grandparents, we would just go home from school by bus. Sid and I would stay by ourselves until my mother arrived at five. I taught myself how to cook out of necessity, so that my brother and I had something to eat and not have to wait for mom to get home. We had to do a lot alone. Sometimes my brother helped, but for the most part I washed dishes, cleaned house, and did the laundry. I believe that made me the strong-willed person I am today. Since Sid and I were always together, I felt it was necessary to write the majority of this poem in couplets. The lines that stand alone are to create emphasis. Furthermore, for the line, "to South Padre Island," I felt was appropriate since an island stands alone in the ocean. This isolation was similar to what my brother and I experienced being at home alone for the majority of our childhood.

Even before 1999, the year my parents separated permanently, I used to listen to various boy bands like the Backstreet Boys and NSYNC. After the divorce though, my taste for music turned to rage rap, as a reflection of the rage I felt within. One artist that had a major impact on me was Tupac Shakur. I was fascinated with how his words moved me, not just because of the violence and anger in his songs, but because of the passion and connections I felt with his emotions expressed through music. His song "Fuck the World," captures this passion through the emotions depicted in his music:

They tryna say that I don't care

I woke up and screamed "Fuck the World!"

They tryna say that I don't care

Just got up and screamed "Fuck the World!"

When I was coming up rough that wasn't if what you called

it

that's why I smoke blunts now and run with alcoholics (12-15, 20-22).

I noticed Tupac would put tons of emotion into his songs. At this point in my life, my feelings were a mix of anger and pain ignited by my parents' divorce. I connected with the words in this song and made them my motto for living. I thought if my parents didn't care about my happiness or my brothers, then why should I care about a world that is cold and cruel? I would listen to this song repeatedly while I was in high school. Tupac's use of profanity validated his honesty when using emotion, so I also tend to use profanity as a poetic tool to engage my readers. Not only do I feel it adds to the emotional complexities in my poetry, but I also feel that a major component of my poetry is honesty. I write how I speak.

In the midst of the aftermath of my parents' divorce, I was kicked out of my dad's house during my adolescent years. My dad and I got in a fight and I moved out of his house. I stopped going to school, so my mother had kicked me out as well. I was living in the shed behind my mom's house with a washing machine, a wooden floor, and a radio. I never knew until my final semester as a MFA candidate that there were other Mexican American authors who had been in gangs and wrote about their experiences. Luis J. Rodríguez lived in a garage, with no running water, next to his parents' house in high school. I lived in a shed for about three months and was always jumping back and forth from my mom's and dad's house. I portray this moving back and

forth between my parents' homes and my struggles to finish high school in "Divorcing Love" and "Freshman to the 3rd Degree." In "Divorcing Love," I compare two teddy bears to the situation I had with my parents:

Then I was forced to choose between

living with Bobby or La Gemma.

Sometimes I heard La Gemma

whisper in my ear *no te ama Bobby*.

Other days Bobby would say

She doesn't love you, she loves money.

I also use couplets in this poem because I am comparing my relationship with my parents to two objects that resemble my parents. The two teddy bears are meant to be described differently. My mother and I were constantly putting each other down with hurtful words. My father was always more loving and I always preferred to be with him since I was a kid.

Additionally, for years I was moving back and forth between homes. My parents didn't really help me when making decisions. I remember both of them would try to turn me against one another, my father, by telling me that, "Your mom doesn't love you" while my mother would tell me, "Your father doesn't love you." It was confusing and hurtful. So I thought if they didn't care about me and my feelings in all of this, then why should I care about my careless decisions like fighting, stealing, or dropping out of school? This contributed to me not caring for education, but neither one accepted this, so after I exhausted my stays with friends, I moved to live in the shed behind my mom's. She said I couldn't come home if I decided not go to school. I therefore spent three years as a freshman at Pharr- San Juan-Alamo North High School as portrayed in "Freshman to the 3rd Degree":

I go to school to waive my red flag.

In need to let everybody know, that if
you are not from the barrio
you need to pack your shit and go.

We protect this curb like
it is our last line of defense.
If you cross the street look twice,

or you might end up in a ditch.

As I was dealing with my parents' divorce, I joined a gang that most of my cousins and some of my uncles were a part of. I wanted a reputation that represented the violence and instilled fear in those who knew me. I felt this gang was a form of acceptance and family that I desperately craved. I wasted so much valuable time trying to prove my worth to the gang. Yet I refuse to regret my experiences because they are the foundation of my writing and determination to be a better person. As a poet, I write to reach those who are on the same path, or who feel their life is hopeless and that it's too hard to try and move forward. "Freshman to the 3rd Degree" is at the beginning of my collection and has a lot of rhyme. I felt I should show how hip hop has influenced my writings during my years as a teen. I used three line stanzas because I felt this was appropriate considering the three-year time frame I spent as a freshman. I feel long lines would also help me portray the amount of time it took me to graduate from high school.

As a teenager, I started to study Tupac's lyrics. I played his CD's over and over, memorizing every lyric to every song, hypnotized. I noticed that the parts of his songs that stuck with me the most were his use of alliteration: "They say pussy and paper is poetry, power and pistols / Plotting on murderin muderfuckers 'for they get you / Picturing pitiful punk niggas copping pleas" (Shakur 1-3). Tupac is depicting his life as a rap star in these lines through alliteration. He is saying that he has money, women, power, and pistols for protection because of his popularity through the poetry in his lyrics. He plots against those who wish to do him harm and watches as they plea for forgiveness. As a teen I didn't know what alliteration was, but I noticed that there was a repetition of the first letter of a certain section of words. Ever since I recognized this, I have always tried to make alliteration a component of my writing. At times it leads me to not engage in sensory and specific details because I focus on the flow of words. It doesn't always work for me, but my initial drafts usually have alliteration; and as I revise I change sayings in order to also provide powerful images. In music it is all about what one says. However, I feel that my poetry needs to have a combination of showing through images and telling with words.

During my third year in high school, I decided to drop out of school to work construction as depicted in my poem "Casco." I derived the title from one of my many cousins who had gone to work with my uncle and who my uncle had nicknamed "Casco," which in Spanish translates to a hard hat, just as I was hard headed for not listening to my mother's advice to stay in school. My uncle is a hardworking man and has been for many years now. His life motto is "We are going to help build America." I enjoyed my experiences with my uncle, however he was very demanding to the point where his words were hurtful:

Órale! Rápido! No puedes o qué!

10 hour shifts.

Drink. Snorting chalk lines.

Break my back and body.

Your hard hat slowly squeezes corrosion.

500 ft. of build-up bolts out your mouth.

Si no quieres trabajar regresate a la casa con las viejas.

At 19 years old, I was getting paid 19 dollars an hour helping my uncle install doors and walls at a hospital in Jackson, Mississippi. Nineteen dollars to me was a lot considering minimum wage, which was around \$5.85 at that time. Keep in mind that my uncle only has a high school diploma. He once mentioned at a family gathering that he only made around \$25,000 a year. He's a contractor, but I felt he wouldn't have to work so hard and be away from home, if he had a degree. He loves what he does, so I suppose that is all that matters.

Moreover, "Casco" shows how I knew I had to educate myself to avoid being away from my family and breaking my back while doing so. I tried to use construction terminology in this poem. I felt it would help support the image of labor intensity when working construction. I wanted to get a car and I wanted money and I knew that this type of work would help me buy them. I was only able to work for about a month because I had to come back to Texas to report. Being on probation, I wasn't supposed to leave the Hidalgo County. When I returned, I bought my car and life only went downhill. I had been out of high school for a while, so I was just running the street with my friends drinking and smoking. I depicted these struggles with the labels and tragedies that come from living a gang life in "Mi Río Grande Barrio":

You may die here if your bandera
doesn't match los colores de mi barrio.

Blood red. *Eres Bombita o Chicano?*

Royal blue. *Eres Trece o Sureño?*

Gold and Glock Black. *Eres Latin King?*

Un pelón en estos colores
es un pelón que no quiere vivir.

Mi welita siempre llora cuando
diez pelados están arriba de uno.

Nos dice *son una bola de cobardes.*

We still stand tall, chest and head to sky.

When I was going through these experiences, I never realized the impact it would have in my poetry. I use a lot of colors in this poem to show how fierce the reactions of gang member could be if members of another gang wore the “wrong” colors, to emphasize the importance of color in the hood. I also felt it necessary to incorporate family by addressing my ‘welita. Back then, we never would worry about the pains that could potentially be inflicted on our families.

When I began taking creative writing courses at the University of Texas – Pan American I only knew that I had a lot of stories to tell. I also knew that I wanted to tell these stories and experiences through my writing and be as honest as I could possibly be. It wasn't until I started

my thesis at the now University of Texas Rio Grande Valley that I realized there were other writers addressing topics like jail and street life. My committee chair Professor Emmy Pérez, in the beginning of 2016, recommended texts. Although I am still in the process of becoming familiar with Raúl Salinas' work, I want to acknowledge his work because I feel his poem "A Trip through the Mind Jail" relates to "Mi Río Grande Barrio" because of the descriptions he provides in regards to his barrio:

Neighborhood of my childhood

neighborhood that no longer exists

some died young—fortunate—some rot in prisons

the rest drifted away to be conjured up

in minds of other like them.

For me: only the NOW of THIS journey is REAL!

Neighborhood of my adolescence

neighborhood that is no more

YOU ARE TORN PIECES OF MY FLESH!!!

Therefore, you ARE.

LA LOMA—AUSTIN—MI BARRIO—(135-145).

This section of "A Trip through the Mind Jail" shows how he no longer lets the places he has been conduct his life. However, life in gangs and barrios has damaged him: "YOU ARE TORN PIECES OF MY FLESH!!!" and there seems to be a love from where he comes from. Although these places have torn his flesh, they will always be a part of his body, spirit, and soul as writer. He uses his experiences in his writing to show that it is important to write about the places we

have been and were able to break away from, but we must never forget their importance because of the youth who feel confined to barrio life. Salinas aims to identify not only the lifestyle choices that affect the decisions of youth in the barrio, he also aims to connect the social factors that contribute to the repetition of Latino/s being caught up in the system of incarceration and death.

Furthermore, I will always have love for my barrio and everyone who is, and was born and raised there. I come from the East Side of Pharr. I know death, I know pain, I know poverty, and that will never change. When I write, my work is more of a reflection of my experiences in this lifestyle in order to make a difference and reach those who are on the same depressive and destructive path. This path will eventually only lead us only to three places: prisons, hospitals, or the grave.

The Meaning of Life: My Struggles Breaking Away from the Streets

This second section of my critical introduction is my journey breaking away from the street life by committing myself to my studies. After returning from working construction with my uncle at the age of 19, I decided that I needed to at least get my high school diploma. I re-enrolled into PSJA North, but I was still in 9th grade. As a result, I didn't have the time to obtain my diploma within a reasonable time frame. I moved to a school that allowed me to acquire my high school diploma within a year or less. I started at One Stop Multi Service Charter School, which later became Ignite Public Schools. This school no longer exists, but the school's official name is derived from the three services offered. The school had elementary students, high school students, and also offered GED classes. I got into all kinds of trouble there, so I graduated after three years instead of one.

During these three years, I was constantly getting locked up right before finals for a DWI, evading arrest, and revoking probation. I evaded arrest while I was on probation for my second DWI which I acquired before I was 21 and before I even had a driver's license, so I had to start the semester over again each time. At 25, during my second semester at UTPA, I decided to reflect on my struggles to finish high school by writing "Life in My Concrete Cube." I also depict my accomplishments as a college student. I feel this is the most prominent and important poem in this collection. This is why I decided "Life in My Concrete Cube" should be the preface to my collection:

I am exhausted of crashing, yet I drive
convicted circles around the devil's mansions.

God? Mother? Father? Please help me.
Release me from the shackles I forged in flames.

They rip my wrists and choke my veins
each time I try and fail not knowing what I pursue.

Mother, worry no more. Your lost son
will carve his way out of this concrete cube.

Another man is created from concrete.
I see diplomas, degrees, and honor societies

in your smiles. I just hope I don't detour
back into the same dark womb.

Years of drugs, parties, and illegal activities finally made me realize that I needed to change before I ended up dead or in prison. I knew change was required because Salomon and Phat, my closest homies, were sent to prison. Other homies, like Ricky and Cuba were also dying. I never went to prison, but I was very familiar with Hidalgo County Jail. I knew I didn't want to go back. In "Life in My Concrete Cube" I describe jail and solitary confinement. When I say "concrete cube" it is both in physical and mental reference. Couplets are prominent in this poem. I use them to depict the two paths I struggled with. One of being a convict and the other becoming a scholar. In addition, David Thomas Martinez's book *Hustle* also describes a situation in the system in "California Penal Code 266":

On the blade
he glides behind his bitch,
a white tee set sail
on the rolling concrete walk.

Cautious of sirens and lights, (1-4).

Martinez's poem identifies the cautions one must take in prison. When I was in jail, I lived in a constant state of caution. You can't trust anybody and convicts constantly spit lies. They want you to trust them, so they can take advantage of you. Thomas is describing the forced sex that can become a reality due to the predators looking for prey in prison. I have never been to prison and county jail is too controlled for sexual abuse to happen. Yet my cousin served a 10-year sentence and he had no problem saying he had, "bitches" in prison.

When I write I expose my life experiences, so that jail or prison don't become the reality of the at-risk youth I aim to reach. Instead of continuing a convict's reality, I strive to write about these experiences in order to generate awareness of the difficulties people face in the penal system. I felt I had a purpose in this world and prison was not that purpose, so education and writing saved my life of becoming a labeled life felon. At first I thought I could change the world, but through my journey I was content if I could just at least change the mindset of individuals going through similar experiences. During my college career, I worked as a collegiate mentor at UTPA. I was assigned to OSM and I was happy because I was asked to present my experiences and accomplishments to students who were just like me. After the presentation, some of these troubled teens came up to me asking, "Do you still think I can graduate?" I told them of course. If I could change my criminal lifestyle, then they could have the same strength to do so.

The first Monday after my high school graduation I knew I wanted to go to college. I told my mom "Get out of bed mom...I want to enroll at STC." She was in bed and out of work for months due to depression. My brother Sid was in Iraq serving his second tour as a Marine. He had left his base after a helicopter he should have been in exploded. He was replaced with his closest friend at the last minute and he felt guilty, as death should have been his. So he left the base in hopes that eventually somebody would kill him. Before 2000 Marines were deployed to search for him, the Iraqi Military picked him up and released him, and he was flown to Washington for a mental evaluation. When this happened, I was actually locked up in solitary confinement at county jail. My dad went to visit me and let me know about Sid's situation. This also contributed to me wanting to change my careless lifestyle. I was also contributing to my mother's depression as depicted in "Sacred Heart":

New Year's Eve Two Thousand Six

I grilled my mother's heart.

Before the barbeque,
mother baked me a cake to celebrate

A new year to her meant I made it through
another three hundred and sixty five days.

She was smiling at trash bags full of empty
beer bottles for not consuming me
on day three hundred and sixty four.

I was enrolled at South Texas College, but was still drinking every weekend at home with friends. My mom only let this happen because she would rather I be home drinking than out in the streets where she couldn't keep an eye on me. Whenever I'd contact her from jail though, she was always harsh saying, "Why are you calling me? I didn't put you there." I know it always hurt her deep down when I was locked up. It got me thinking about how my brother was out there risking and trying to take his life, yet I was locked up because I want to be a bad ass who runs the streets day and night without a care in the world. This poem is a reflection of 2006 when I was still living a life that could put me back to the concrete cube I didn't want to live in anymore. I didn't want to be a disappointment to my mother anymore. I didn't want her to live life wondering if her son would be dead the next day.

When writing “Sacred Heart,” in 2015 I didn’t want to be cliché. I wanted to be original. Instead of using the common cliché of a melting heart, I thought that it would have more impact on my readers if the narrator cooked his mother’s heart for consumption. The consumption is not intended to be literal. It aims to depict the pain I inflicted. In 2008, is when I was able to graduate with my Associate’s in Business Administration while maintaining a 3.3 GPA. I was also Vice President of Kappa Beta Delta Honor Society and I was on the President’s Honor Roll. It was at STC where my passion for poetry began. Lanessa Poulton, instructor for one of my English Composition courses, introduced me to “Do not go gentle into that goodnight,” a villanelle by Dylan Thomas. I will remember this poem for the rest of my life because of this instructor:

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Don’t go gentle into that goodnight.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light (16-19).

The final stanza in the villanelle has to be the most difficult part of the poem. The two lines at the end must be composed with deep thought in order for them to make sense. It’s like a puzzle; if the piece isn’t right it will not fit. I remember being intrigued not only by Thomas’s words, but also by the rhyme and refrain of the villanelle. I had never known that poetry could potentially have strict guidelines that one must follow in order to write poetry in form. For one of my assignments, I mimicked his poem and created my own villanelle. Looking back, the poem I wrote was full of clichés and had very little sensory detail. The poem was more based on my emotions. I didn’t research the history of the form. I was only focused on how to structure the poem, so my villanelle was nearly identical to Thomas’s. I felt like every poem had to rhyme and

repeat, but I only was interested mainly in the rhyme. The difficulties in creating this poem broke my brain, but it was a break that I enjoyed. It was a challenge to plug words in where I felt they were necessary to relate to his poem. This is why I decided to include poems in form in my collection.

At UTPA in 2012, Professor Emmy Pérez exposed me to other forms like the pantoum and ghazal, and both are in my collection. I also included a villanelle and a sestina. Poulton also introduced me to Elizabeth Bishop's "Sestina," which I also mimicked when I first starting writing poetry: "Time to plant tears, says the almanac. The grandmother sings to the marvelous stove / and the child draws another inscrutable house" (37-38). Again, due to the repetition and combination of words in the final stanza, I feel it is here where the sestina shows its success.

Forms will always be an important component of poetry. The strict guidelines of meter and iambic pentameter from the past has lead poets to alter and construct contemporary modifications because of the evolution of poetry over the decades because of how forms can hinder the message of a poem due to the strictness of the form. At UTPA in September, 2014, visiting poet Laurie Ann Guerrero spoke to students and gave the audience a preview of her not yet released poetry collection *A Crown for Gumencindo*. She explained the crown of sonnets format and each sonnet is a continuation of the previous one, so the whole book is composed of sonnets entirely. Guerrero's use of the sonnet illustrates how the form is still popular in today's poetry.

Another major factor in my passion for writing poetry was a personal relationship I had in 2008. I was convinced that I had found love, but my unfaithfulness made her leave me and I fell into a very deep depression. This state of self-loathing and loneliness is described in my poem, "In the Dark of a Lonely Day." This was the beginning of my obsession with writing and

its impact on my life, which also stems from the emotions coursing through my brain during this period:

A car passes by, the sky shakes
from the bass of the bullets fired.

I wish one would have crossed
through my window to bring light, to the dark

that holds my smile upside down.

A knock at my locked door gives

my knife an erection. I stab the door
fifty times for the fifty percent of my heart

that still wants to touch the skin on the other side.

I didn't want to address the relationship explicitly when writing this poem. Rather, I wanted to focus on the mental state I was in and how writing was a mechanism to cope with my feelings. Not only did I want to invoke depression, I wanted to show the frustrations that stem from being depressed and confined. I would hardly leave my house, and let alone my room. I locked myself in my room, drowning my depression with alcohol. I started writing everyday nearly three or five times each day from morning to night. Before each writing session I would note the date and time. I wrote to the point where I stopped caring about making note of the date and time when I wrote and instead just focused on rhyme and content. I recently came across Raúl Salinas's in *Un*

Trip through the Mind Jail y Otras Excursions, in which he also references day and time. In this collection, nearly every poem has the “SOLEDAD” and date referenced at the end.

“SOLEDAD” is the prison in California where he was locked up when he wrote this collection of poems. I feel that we both did this in order to identify the significance of the time and places we wrote. During this depression, I wanted to be able to reflect on how I was feeling and I believe that noting the date and time for me was a declaration of my presence in the world.

Furthermore, in my journals, I felt like I was writing lyrics to songs because I was still into rap music. So I focused on my rhythm and rhyme. I don’t try to rhyme in my poems now, but my goal is to use my origins of writing and combine them with what I have learned as poet in college. Although contemporary poetry is not heavily grounded in end rhyme, poets like Thomas Sayers Ellis have poems that rhyme due to their musicality as seen in *The Maverick Room* in poems like “All Their Stanzas Look Alike”:

All their fences

All their prisons

All their exercises

All their agends

All their stanzas look alike

All their metaphors

All their bookstores

All their plantations

All their assassinations

All their stanzas look alike (Ellis 1-10).

In “All Stanzas Look Alike,” Sayers uses anaphora and consonance to engage with rhythm. Most end words used in this section of “All Stanzas Look Alike,” use the letter “s.” Professor Steven P. Schneider exposed me to Juan Felipe Herrera’s *187 Reasons Mexicanos Can’t Cross the Border*. Herrera, the National Poet Laureate, is a genius with anaphora in his poetry collection SAY MORE. And although I don’t much indulge in anaphora, for about two years I was writing nearly every day, with rhythm and rhyme as my focus. My writings revolved around sadness and anger because of my lost love. It was very rare for me to write or reflect on happy moments in my life. I hated the world and I thought the world hated me. I blocked out everyone and everything except my journal and pen.

Writing & Realization: A Poet, Scholar, Husband, Teacher, & Son

This third section of my critical introduction is used to show the realization of my transformation because of writing. Writing made me feel better because I was letting go of the emotions, but the emotions were still inside of me. I would constantly get sparks of sentiment and I would put those feelings on paper. Which is why I tend to write poems about writing at times like “Natural Toxicity of Love”:

The roll of your tip
tickles each page we flip.

We share smiles, frowns, tears,
blood and bandages.

Clichés make me want to rip
the white and wipe my brown ass.

At UTPA, in 2011, is when I fell in love with my pen and paper and decided that I wanted to share my writings. When friends would come over I would read to them and allow them to read my writings on their own. Which was difficult because at times I would write negatively about my friends, but I would still let them read it, to the point where I remember my friend JV once said, “Damn that’s how you really feel about us?” It didn’t make me lose my close friends, but others I shared with did shy away from me.

Graduating from STC, I lost interest as a business major, so I decided that even though I wanted to open my own business, I didn’t think I needed a degree. This is when I told myself, “Why not do pursue a degree in a subject I love?” I thought about my past and present. As a child I read a lot and now as an adult I was constantly writing. Tupac always spoke about “Dying a living legend,” which implies leaving this world without, but only physically. Over a decade after his demise his music is still alive in the hearts of millions. This gave me the idea that when I die I don’t want to die the average individual. I began to think of ways I could leave this world and still be remembered. I knew my chances of becoming a famous rap artist were slim to none. I began to wonder, how are others remembered even after death? With remembrance in mind, I composed my sestina “How will you live when you die”:

Will our death be the world’s convenience?

Writing will allow me to connect

with the living through death, connect

the dead and the living. Sheets laugh

as my pen creates custom convenience

for words to fall on my page like tears

and show the world the individual behind
the white mask of my paper.

I really enjoyed writing “the white mask of my paper,” because it implies that I can hide behind my paper by expressing my emotions, but I still want the world to feel me. I love the complexity of the sestina and other forms, so in my thesis I included multiple poems in form. When writing “How will you live when you die,” I also considered how not every writer is read with respect. I want to respect the privilege of borrowing the eyes of my readers, but at the same time I want others to respect my craft. I pay attention to every word, image, and detail when composing my poems.

When I changed my major at UTPA in 2011, I was aspiring to become a novelist, but my passion for poetry was too strong. My first creative writing course with Professor Pérez help me build the confidence to pursue my passion. I was never confident in my writing because I had never had any type of feedback. In her course we were exposed to writing workshops. In “Before Bliss,” a poem I wrote as a graduate student reflecting on my life before and my life now, I also reflect on my workshop experiences:

Before writer workshop circles with voices suggesting

No. Yes. Maybe cut this line.

I don't understand this. Can you?

Before this I had a diploma. Granted upon
walking down the cold concrete corridors
inside Hotel Hidalgo County. No family

at my ceremony just a tank of babosos del barrio,

who follow the Street Constitution:

WE the Vatos del Barrio, in order to create a more trucha clika, establish injustice, ensure domestic instabilities, provide proper bullets and vests for defense, promote captains to generals who will secure Sanctuaries of Insanity to esquinas and prospectos, do disdain and establish a twelve foot hole in the United East Side Streets of America.

My poem identifies with creative writers and those who come from the streets. I started out wanting to reach the audience of those from the streets, but as my knowledge of poetry grew, I knew that my writing needed to be able to reach various types of audiences. I was amazed at the praise I would receive from my peers, but at the same time I was aggravated by it. I always wanted to be the best in the class. I always felt I had the potential to be better, but limiting comments from students like, “This is amazing” pissed me off because I knew it could be a lot better. I would say, “I fucking worked hard composing this poem and all you can tell me is that it is good?” I wanted specifics as to why my poem is good. David Rice was one student who was particularly critical with his feedback and I respected him for it. When I gave out comments to my peers, I was as honest and I provided extensive feedback, so this too added to my frustrations with workshops because I took a lot of time to help others, but their vague comments weren’t helping me develop as a writer.

Moreover, I feel my honesty and openness in regards to my experiences are what draw people into my writings. I have a point of view that can’t be learned from books. One can try

portraying life in the streets, jail, and gangs through imagination. However, I feel they would lack authenticity in the product. I write for prisoners, gang members, those that come from divorced families, creative writers, and others who feel life is hopeless. I have lived and experienced “Before Bliss.” These types of individuals could easily distinguish real from fake. Students in school and at-risk youths are also very important to me as my audience. I connect with my audiences through depicting my experiences in jail, gangs, and the streets like I did as a collegiate mentor at OSM. I also tend to use a lot of profanity because that is how I speak. I feel profanity and the languages used in the street can catch a reader’s attention.

In addition, *Always Running* by Luis J. Rodríguez also aims to reach a similar audience: “I’ve visited numerous prisons, juvenile centers, sober living homes and rehabilitation centers. I’ve read my poems in Maximum Security Yard at San Quentin Prison as prisons talked, worked out with weights, played chess and jogged (oh, and quite a few stopped to listen)” (xii). If Rodríguez were making up what he has done, witnessed, or experienced I doubt these prisoners would respect him or stop to listen to what he has to say. This is exactly why openness and honesty are essential to every poem I construct. I hope to publish my work and read to at-risk youths and at universities across the nation. I want others to connect with my writings. I want to plant a seed in their lifeless gardens, so they can watch it grow into something constructive.

Lastly, I was always striving to be like William Shakespeare, because I felt that he was the best writer because he is still studied today in multiple genres of writing. When I started writing poems, I would write very abstract lines because I didn’t know how to incorporate specific details. The poem that had the most impact to me was a Shakespearian sonnet, “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” (Sonnet 18). I loved that it was a poem in form and my favorite lines were the opening ones, “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? / Thou art more

lovely and more temperate” (1-2). Because of the language, I felt that these lines were abstract because I wasn’t sure what they meant until I read the lines repeatedly. I came to realize that Shakespeare also wrote with very concrete detail and that my poetry should provide specifics for understanding. I still continue to be heavily intrigued by poetic forms, however taking courses in creative writing opened my eyes to how much poetry has changed through the times:

“Practitioners of any art will often feel compelled to explain it, and poets are no exception” (Gioia, Mason, Schoerke ix). I was always trying to explain the content in my poetry. I didn’t realize that you can show meaning through sensory and specific details. Comments from Professor Pérez helped me realize which lines were abstract. As I developing as a writer, I am coming to see how concrete detail is important. Taking courses with Professor Pérez also showed me the importance of using specific details so that my readers don’t have to question my purpose or meaning. I want my readers to have a general understanding of what I want to say and that may be difficult if I am not using specific details to portray my messages.

King Mexican-Seed meets Texas-Soil was my first poem published by the *Southeast Review* out of the Florida State University. I was one of the five finalists in the contest. In this issue, I am a featured poet and the review publishes aspiring and well known authors. This poem developed out of a course with Professor Pérez. She assigned us to read *I am Joaquín* by Rodolfo Corky Gonzáles and try to write something similar: “Yo soy Joaquín, / perdido en un mundo de confusion: / caught up in the whirl of gringo society” (1-4). I was familiar with the poem because Dr. Marci McMahon introduced it to us in a Mexican-American Literature course. I was baffled that I knew nothing about this individual and his activism in the civil rights movement for Mexican Americans. Reading Gonzáles’s poem made me want to compose something similar, but based on my own experience and voice. In “King Mexican-Seed meets Texas-soil,” I started

with a bunch of “I am’s” but wanted my poem to have a more Mexican touch to it, so I changed some of those “I am” to “Soy de.” It was after reading this that I felt comfortable using Spanish in my poetry:

I am Mexican-

Seed, growing with

dead roots, planted

in American soil.

Soy del Sur de Tejas.

Where the line makes

granma’s back wet, but mine dry.

Soy hombre. Standing around

a fire made for Brown Kings,

drinking out

brown bottles filled

with golden piss.

My poem was generated off of my reflection of my family barbeques. When we get together all the women are usually sitting at the tables. The men were always drinking beers around the barbeque pit. I thought of my dad and his machismo and how my mother would not be the submissive woman he wanted her to be. I wanted to mimic the social spectrum that my father

and his brothers believe. Don't get me wrong, they love their wives and spoil them, but I don't agree with the fact that they believe a woman should adhere to what a man says. Women deserve the same rights and respect that men feel they are entitled to. They should not be instilled with a fear of saying what they feel, need, and want in life. If my mother had been this submissive woman, she would not have been as well off as she is today. She owns four lots and two houses. My father still rents a home with his second wife. She realized after 15 years of marriage that they would get nowhere because of his jealousy and pride. He always put his mother in front of mine. This didn't help because my 'welita believes all women should be submissive to their husbands as she was to my 'welito back then.

I met my wife as an undergraduate at UTPA in 2012. We were in two courses together and we began to work out together. Our relationship grew from there and we were married after knowing each other for about two years. We graduated together and have gone through many struggles in our marriage. My wife has been a huge part of my willingness to become a better man. I found a connection with our struggles in a poem by Ricardo Sánchez:

in the midst of our pobreza
we bask in each other's arms,
you war, tender brown-ness
calms the pandemonium in my loins; (1-4).

We have been through a lot together. We are both students so we struggle with money all the time, but we always manage to make it through. Despite our closeness, "The Metal Fangs of Matrimony" depicts my anxiety of being with one woman forever, "The mouth open/waiting to unionize Mr. Fucked/and Ms. From-This-Day-Forward" (1-3). I used a lot of white space in the poem to resemble doubts I was faced with.

Overall, I know I wouldn't be complete without her. Which is why I wrote "Happy Home" where I acknowledge my love for her:

Together we've accomplished what
I would've never done alone. A tiny home
grows bigger, grass is greener, a car that
isn't sick. Together my half heart is whole.

Our relationship is an important component to my collection and my transformation as an individual. In relation to my style, I am honest here as well, and use couplets again because we are a couple. We go together. We belong together. There was a point in our marriage where I became depressed because I had three jobs and all of sudden I was out of work. I was really counting on my job as a GED instructor, however it didn't work out and she was the one that grounded me, and reminded me that everything happens for a reason.

The reason came in the fall of 2015 when I was contacted by Dr. Colin Charlton, who gave me the opportunity to teach in the Freshman Writing Program at UTPA/UTRGV. Becoming a professor is my goal in life. I wrote a poem for my students because they are also a major component of my new found happiness. Juan Felipe Herrera's poem, "How to enroll in a Chicano Studies class," expresses this well: "Go back and find the seed-voices, / the ones that raised you, the letters that arrived with you red-green / spirit, the ancient songs way deep inside" (8-10). I always encourage my students to incorporate their personal experiences because I feel it is important for them to know that their life is important in writing an argumentative essay. Their experiences have a lot to do with their interests and opinions about particular topics. I wrote, "Teaching Fish How to Swim," using a play on words considering I teach First Year Composition Courses.

I used to live in the bottom of a ditch.

There is nothing but dark and dirty

water. I don't wish this on you.

I greet you all for the first time

dressed to cover my tattooed body,

but I speak with a barrio background.

I want my students to feel comfortable with me. I always share my life with them from time to time because Lord knows they feel overwhelmed with work and school. I remind them that in my last semester as an undergraduate, I took 15 hours and worked as a collegiate mentor, GED instructor, and at Domino's Pizza as a deliver driver. If I can do it, I assure them they can too and that I will do everything possible to help them succeed in a course that they must take. I use three line stanzas because every time I have individual meetings with them I think of three words, "Yes. You. Can." I end with one line because that is the line toward their success in the course and walking the line to receive their college degrees.

I would have never been able to overcome my struggles in life if it weren't for my mother. That is why I close this collection with "Cleansing Bad Relationships." The title is meant to mean the cleansing of our rough relationship and the cleansing of my body that is rid of toxins:

I wanted my body's functions to fail.

Kidney failure, gastritis, and a hernia.

I almost died, but I survived.

The pain was so deep. These experiences
are cherished because now our love is strong.

No more death follows when I leave the house.

No more *fuck you mom* when I scream.

No more organs fail me.

Just a mother and son saying *I love you*

every night before we go to sleep.

I feel it is only right that I close my collection with a poem that depicts how our relationship went from hell to heaven. We used to have very nasty relationship always putting each other down, hurting each other both physically and mentally. She always said I was capable of achieving great things and that I could accomplish anything I put my mind to. I thank her every day for never giving up on me despite our differences. When I wrote “Cleansing Bad Relationships,” I was consumed by a mass of emotions. I don’t lie in my poems because I am like my mother, very direct and blunt. Although this sometimes causes problems for me, I never changed. I thought it was important to identify strong emotions of how our relationship was. This, I feel, gives more power to the obstacles I was able to overcome. It also acknowledges my transformation from the negative to positive.

“Save My Sins for Sunday” is a dedication and declaration of my newfound happiness, coming from the rough streets and struggling to drive on the right side of the road. Recently, I found out that I have a five-year-old daughter, Maya Alessandra Fuentes. She adds to my joy and love for life. Writing was and still is a strong factor in ability to cope with any situation. I have

lunch with Maya at her school every chance I get and I write her poems with a drawing every week. I will end “Breaking Out of Life in My Concrete Cube” with a poem I wrote for Maya titled “You Are.”

You are the air that fills my lungs.

You are the veins that make my heart beat.

You are the first light after the darkest nights.

You are my daughter and daddy loves you for life (1-4).

CHAPTER II

POEMS

Life in My Concrete Cube

No surgeries could open my heart.
I'm diagnosed with distress syndrome.

Trapped in a 52 door corridor voices echo.
Every pinche-guardia-puto cry is confined.

Fists banging steel doors are my lullabies.
I must adjust these tunes, if I want change.

All residents at Hotel Hidalgo County wear
magnetic shackles. *Once I thought I was out,*

but I was pulled back into my cage. Officer Chauffer
drives with direction, dark skies blink red-blue.

I have been here alone before.
The gates only seem to grow

so each time I know where
I must stay until my days expire.

I am exhausted, yet I drive
convicted circles around the devil's mansions.

God? Mother? Father? Please help me.
Release me from the shackles I forged in flame,

they rip my wrists and choke my veins each time
I try and fail not knowing what I pursue.

Mother, worry no more. Your lost son will
carve his way out of this concrete cube.

I can see you stare into your cell phone,

in hope that it doesn't have a flat-line ring tone.

Come home. I hear and feel your tears,
but do not care until I see blood

stream down my cheeks
because a bottle broke my face.

Another man is created from concrete.
I see diplomas, degrees, and honor societies

in your smiles. I just hope I don't detour
back to the same dark womb.

I occupy my eyes in printed pages.
I know these learning institutions

just as well as these felony-filled streets.
I am tired. I try. I am tired. I tried.

You believe my brain is bigger than my head.
I just hope your lessons echo in my ears.

I should be dressed in dark linen,
we both know this. You insist

god shields me from the wicked that dies inside.

CHAPTER III

DIVORCING LOVE

Truck on Elm Street

Granpa owned a white
Nissan pick-up

he bought

when whites owned America.
He parked outside

the inside of his property line.
His home, alumino-wood made

to make sure it would keep
out los bandidos y tacuaches.

He and granma looked after
my brother Sid and I

while our parents
were probably home fucking.

We attended Farias
Elementary where every day after school

Granpa would pick-us up. From Farias
to la tiendita for paletas de payaso.

I hated that damn school.
Some kids made fun of me saying

Mueve tu cabezota pinche wedo.
First grade I learned

how to beat a face with

white fists and eight knuckles.

I punched to shut mouths.
We lived in Pharr,

but I was raised to fight or fall in Alamo.
Mi Granpa era trabajador,

helped stab stone stakes
in the bottom of La Laguna Madre

to hold up Queen Isabella's Causeway,
so we could cross from Port Isabel

to South Padre Island.

We knew he worked hard,
his hands could rub the white off

his single cab Nissan.
Una tarde mi granma nos estaba

haciendo tortillas con mantequilla.
Sid and I sat on the lips of the truck's bed

cuando sale Granpa. *Hey cabrones*
bajensen de mi pinche troka Knee-san

se van a caer hijos de la chingada.
We took our butts off the edge,

placed them in the bed. As he
stomped the porch to march inside

the screen door slammed behind him.
Door closed we rose, butts back

on top of the blades of the bed.
What does that beer-belly

under-trimmed-mustache man
know about life on the edge?

I blew a 75-mile-an-hour laugh
that pushed me off the tailgate.

My body fell onto earth's caliche.
Mi cabezota split like a sliced watermelon.

Don't remember shit after.
Something about blood, staples,

and a first grade photo de un
smiling hairless chimuelo.

All I know is that there is white
space in the back of my head

where hair still refuses to grow.

Divorcing Love
para mi primo Eric Guajardo

I cared for two teddy bears.
Bobby y La Gemma.

Bobby was brown like my father.
Gemma era güerita como mi madre.

Sid and I had bunk beds. I slept,
in bottom with Bobby y Gemma.

One night I heard the kitchen crying.
Each shattered dish was a tear.

I walked out my glowing room
made of solar system stickers on walls.

Shards looked like broken hearts.
Then I was forced to choose between

living with Bobby or La Gemma.

Bobby's brown fur was always soft.
No como el pelaje áspero de La Gemma.

Bobby and I left to live on the
low East Side of Pharr-o-lito with welita.

La güerita se quedo en West Side
Pharr where we all lived before.

I aged through the heat and cold.
Through blossoms and blossom's death.

Not knowing whether my heart
belonged in the East or the West.

Sometimes I heard La Gemma
whisper in my ear *Bobby no te ama.*

Other days Bobby would say
She doesn't love you, she loves money.

Mi corazón caliente y frío.
Heat faded Bobby's brown.

Cold dulled Gemma's white fur.
La weda era casi negra ya.

One day I decided.
Ya no necesito vivir.

No necesito uno, ni el otro.
I found a home made of red bandanas.

I felt hugs and kisses from
fists that initiated carnalismo.

My new family lived
in the East Side Streets.

Bobby y La Gemma became
strangers, so I brought them together.

One last reunion. I hugged both
and realized no hearts existed.

So I ripped their fucking fuzzy
heads off and bear-body bagged them.

I loved my teddy bears, but I don't care.

Freshman to the 3rd Degree

High School can't teach you how to roll a toque.
There are rules for marijuanos.
First you break the weed.

It's not glass, pendejo. Take out stems and seeds.
Is it clean? Not your piss, baboso. La mota.
Grab the zig zag, estupid.

Sticky faces you. Fold it in half, twist corners
at the bottom pa que no se salga la mota.
Fill the paper pocket with green leaves.

Now push it down and roll it tight.
Light the shit and take two hits, then
pass it to the left. Why not the right?

Because we are from the barrio
we aren't supposed to do things right.
I go to school to waive my red flag.

I need to let everybody know that
if you are not from the barrio
you need to pack your shit and go.

We protect this curb like
it is our last line of defense.
If you cross the street, look twice

or you might end up in a ditch.
If the hooda-cops come run, duck,
dive, and hide. Our minds are fried

like fish my welita cooks on Sundays.
I have 80 absences from the 100 days in school.
Fuck it, I'm dropping out to go work.

My jefe said I need to help with the bills.
I'm going to work construction with
my Tio Muro and help him build America.

Cascos

Don't speak. Drill.

Your brain is locked
like rusted gears.

My wallet is insulated with
green faces of dead presidents.

My back is curved and cracks.
Feet look like they're wrapped

with sand paper. Moving ten pound
blocks because I didn't want to hold a book.

Every 8 foot door we install
moves us further from our homes.

Stuck in service sin familia.

You're my tio, but you make
me feel like my blood isn't as brown.

Órale! Rápido! No puedes o qué!

10 hour shifts.
Drink. Snorting chalk lines.
Break my back and body.

Your hard hat slowly squeezes corrosion.
500 ft. of build-up bolts out your mouth.

Si no quieres trabajar, regrésate a la casa con las viejas.

When you sleep I stab you
with a pen in my journal.

I know we will never be able
to climb higher than 10 ft scaffolds.

We need a piece of paper that shows
our ability to learn more than we know.

I will get it, while sheet rock shavings
continue to cloud your vision.

Hands carved with calluses.
Concrete Caterpillar boots.

Bye tio, I must reconstruct my brain.

Running

The bang inside my heart
wants to break out my chest.

Don't know which way's best.
Should I go right? Should I go left?

My lungs lack oxygen. I can't see.
My eyes are salt water.

I feel like I just smoked
an ounce of crystal meth.

I feel like King Kong on top of
skyscrapers banging my chest.

The sky flashes red and blue lights,
like a Fourth of July.

Through the crack of a wooden fence
I see shadows wearing bullet proof vests.

I must flee before the figures find me,
the voices over the radio draw near.

*Ten-four we have a sighting of the
suspect fleeing on foot. Copy that.*

Road blocks for my parade, sirens
and charades. I tell myself,

I'm almost in the clear.

Help Homeboy

It started off with taking
tobacco from grandparents.

No care for school,
so no diploma menos un degree.

No hope homie.
Mom is hooked on dope.

I smile with my head down.
Open arms ready to embrace.

Cruising on feet with
a mouth full of smoke.

Whataburger cup full of
ice and Milwaukee's Best.

Mornings don't exist anymore.
Sleep until four, every day.

Mom and son sucking
from the same silver pipe.

Cocaine-cracked brains.
Always singing the same songs.

Instruments: aluminum cans, paper,
grass, silver flutes. Crescendo rotten teeth.

Mi Río Grande Barrio

Twisted fingers in the sky
can engrave tombstones.

When I theatre palm trees
the streets speak *Pharr-o-lito*,

Ghost-town Donna, Mac-a-litos,
Brown-Town Brownsville, Wes-loco.

Four gold thirteen-inch one-hundred spoke rims
spin sunder my carnalitos cherry-red chariot.

You may die here if your bandera
doesn't match los colores de mi barrio.

Blood red. *Eres Bombita o Chicano?*
Royal blue. *Eres Trece o Sureño?*
Gold and Glock black. *Eres Latin King?*

Un pelón en estos colores
es un pelón que no quiere vivir.

Brown skins bleed street-war stories,
become black scars tattooed,

reminders for all those who put in work
for promotion to life in a concrete cube.

Mi welita siempre llora cuando
diez pelados están arriba de uno.

Nos dice *son una bola de cobardes.*
We still stand tall, chest and head to sky.

Hudda-cops set up another road block,
the street is caution-tape cut off.

Le tumbaron la puerta a Juan,
otro pinche raid y se llevaron

plata, plomos, y polvo. También
se llevaron el jefito de Juan con el

hosico lleno dientes de oro.

Padres, perdonen nuestros pecados.

One of my carnales has a toy.
Black and chrome with bullets

that could stop the world when carnales break
the chests of cagaleros en mí barrio.

Our Vatos del Barrio is the church
where eses come to whisper sins to sky,

where you can kneel and pray on
a color-less carpet that claims no clika.

Bombs Away

Three bombitas blown up
by guns and a knife.

Dirty money being printed with
a press filled with tachas y pase.

Crimes with principles:
to live and to die, to love and lie.

Clocks have no time to tick before
the tock digs a 12 foot hole.

Blood cries, body bags, suffering, and suicide.
La causa builds bricks or boxes.

Boxer, Cuba, and Ricky Red. Dead.
Throat slit like a bloody pussy,

head hollowed looking like
road-kill watermelon,

chest broken by bullets. Ricky's baby
in blood drowns and dies inside

a mother's womb.

In the Dark of a Lonely Day

My eyes are wide open.
I can't see through the foil that covers

my windows. They block out the sun.
I don't want sunshine. Reminds me of how bright

a stranger's smile could be. Outside I hear
winds whistle. Does the air call for me?

A car passes by, the sky shakes
from the bass of bullets fired.

I wish one would have crossed
my window to bring light, to the dark

that holds my smile upside down.
A knock at my locked door gives

my knife an erection. I stab the door
fifty times for the fifty percent of my heart

that still wants to touch the skin on the other side.
I don't want to eat. Food makes me feel human.

Sacred Heart

New Year's Eve Two Thousand Six
I grilled my mother's heart.

I held it with a rusty pitch fork
under my golden red flame,

one million votive candles equals one.

A burning red beauty
that I cannot feel
without third degree

burns, burn, burnt.

Before the barbeque,
mother baked me a cake to celebrate.

A new year to her meant I made it through
another three hundred sixty-five days.

She was smiling at trash bags full of empty
beer bottles for not consuming me
on day three hundred and sixty four.

Cooking. Her heart smelled like burning bibles.

I kept seeing scriptures in smoke.
Reaching out to grab *for god so loved the world*
my hand froze melting under cracking coals.

I cried hoping my tears would extinguish
the fire I started under her heart,

but my tears were gasoline.

King Mexican-Seed meets Texas-Soil

I am Mexican-
Seed, growing with
dead roots, planted

in American-Soil.

Soy del Sur de Tejas.
Where the line makes
granma's back wet, but mine dry.

Soy hombre. Standing around
a fire made for Brown Kings,

drinking out
brown bottles filled
with golden piss.

I am from Stetson Crowns,
patriarch heads,

long-sleeve shirts: un-buttoned
up-top to show
the pounded pecho de Rey.

Soy de tight Wrangler Jealously-Jeans,
like the leash that strangles
his vieja's ring finger,

from boots made of
Royal-Skins to stomp out
her freedom to roam

the world outside the kitchen,
forced to dwell in his wooden palace.

No house made of bricks.
Just a fridge full of beers.

Soy from las mujeres who sit
around plastic clothed tables.

Todas las mujeres
wear the same tattoo

de un corazón
half-healed, half-scarred.

I am from female meteorologists,

who forecast then predict
this year's baby showers
with a chance of twins.

Soy from leche de teta,
y no chingues güey.

I am from Granma's
wooden-rocking chair,

always waving
without a tongue to speak.

I am ex-convict
concrete cube
silver shackles
plastic shanks.

Soy un college boy
text books
dry erase boards
world literatures.

I am the cactus flower that
blossoms out of thorns.

Soy de *aye-ha-hi*
y *La Rama del Mesquite*.

Hecho en el condado de Hidalgo,
soy pisto y pistol.

New Year's Eve countdown...

One, two: double zero

BANG!

BANG!

BANG!

Una Vista del Valle

Home of Brown Pride where
raza crosses the Rio Grande River
from Mexico. Ya no eres Mexicano

you're a Mojado. Aquí en El Valle

without a green card you will prosper
to earn pennies instead of pesos, working
as a yardero porque a los gabachos no les gusta

trabajar en el sol, se hacen tomates. We speak our own language

and it es Tex-Mex, porque tenemos las lenguas
mochadas. The fields birth onions, elotes, grapefruits,
and oranges. We have palm and mesquite with roots that can't

be ripped from the brown soil that Browns attend to.

Warm winters. Broiled summers. Cartels still curse homes here
with headless bodies. Stash houses full of starved Mexicanos,
white powder, and green leaves. Gangs wear crucifixes

to protect them from corporate cartel deeds. La Virgen

de Guadalupe y Jesucristo hang from wall in *Las Casas de Madera*.
Green nopales blossom beautiful flowers out of thorns. Cut-off traffic
and *chinga tu madre*. Homemade tacos y tamales, taquerías at every corner.

Lupe Treviño es chueco, se embolsa feria de las drogas que venden los cartels.

Roosters for alarm clocks. Sinvergüenza's on the street corners who would not
let a rain drop slip through their fingers. Ice cream trucks with speakers
screaming *Elotes con chile y mayonesa* through every barrio.

Es como México pero no es México. You know you are in the dip of Tejas
when your car or truck is worth more than your home. A southern sanctuary
for retired gabachos when El Norte is too cold. Starr, Hidalgo, Willacy, and Cameron.

Four counties create our RGV, the pot-hole and dirt road paradise.

Pharr-o-lito, Wes-loco, Ghost Town Donna, Mac-a-lito's, Brown Town
Brownsville. Aquí estamos en nuestro Rio Grande Valluco.

Rocks on the Rio Grande

After "A Point West of Mount San Bernardino" by Juan Delgado

I.

Like rapids in a river her tears
travel through cold water currents.

Held down by concrete chanclas,
praying to mixed race saints,
jumping up for air like a wild nun.

She is inside our eyelids,
a red vein, our country's suicide.

Her fire fades under the stars.
We stare and she knows
our children will not worry.

All these rocks have similar red stains,
roughed by the wild. She drowns for change.

At the morgue devil's dance
La Chacalosa in the frozen meats section.

Demon footprints melt frosty floors
where scales are tipped in favor of infierno.

II.

A flower is left on the rocks.

Dying alone, as she did.
A cariñoso carnation on foreign grounds.

The Browns of Brownsville paint a portrait
of la virgen de guadalupe naked

her cloak ripped, body raided,
begging for her *only begotten son* to save her.

Through mesquite trees two fire flies glow,
watching her beauty break.

Why didn't we report the pure blood
flow down the rock and river rapids?

Two nations yield in front of a white sign.
In red words, *Do Not Enter*.

We see a sign bound between borders,
the entrance to an immigrant's graveyard.

The river of our worlds still flowing.

The Backs of Broken Browns

I am Mexican in Mexico where browns belong.
The Rio Grande is full of American Presidents

because green bills used to keep brown backs dry.
If I cross the border I am fucking wetback. A new breed.

I am not to reach for white clouds in America's Sky.
I thought I may say *I have a dream*, but I realized I

was being treated like Martin Luther King in a poncho.
Racism is still alive. Welcome to America should read

No Browns Allowed. In American Soil I built my bank
cutting trees and pick up leaves. When I sweat it stings

because you look at me like a three legged beggar
on the street corner. Every year I pay Uncle Sam.

Why can't I join the American Team? A foreign
smirk on my immigrant face when you speak to me

assuming *I no speaky English*. Yes I am sun-burnt brown,
but that doesn't mean I can't read what is on white pages.

I too live in this home of your brave. The same brave
who enslaved and whipped Blacks for being dark.

I am not a spic because I know right from wrong. I simply
want respect for those working across America's Lines.

El Mojado vs. White America

I.

He can dream?

Claro. Es un pinche Martin Luther King Jr.
pero quiere plata, ya no quiere trabajar por pesos.

He can swim?

Vato, es un Michael Phelps que nada en el río
verde de El Valle. Mojado sin salvavidas.

He can run?

Simón. Es Justin Gatlin corre porque hay vienen
los agentes de la frontera vestidos como aguacate.

He can jump?

Por favor, es un Michael Jordan de Monterrey
brincando cercas, como un venado asustado.

II.

Los pinche gabachos en America me dicen puras mamadas. Nada mas porque vengo del otro
lado creen que no puedo mejorar en mi vida. Soy una persona como ellos, somos iguales.

*He can stay. Since he has already crossed the river that keeps a brown's back wet. He can work
for pampers, after two years he should have about six kids from two wives y la sancha.*

*He can eat. Or open a pantry. Texas will give his babies' mothers Lone Star: The Mexican Visa.
He can live. He has free Medi-care at our hospitals, if he were to chop his toes off cutting yards.*

*He can speak English. His tongues should be limited only to responding jes sir, no sir, okay sir.
He can speak Spanish, but he should know that his language is as foreign as a dog's bark.*

*He can read. He must know all signs that direct him to his mobile home, after he's done mowing.
He can learn. Learn that he must not strive to rise above the weeds he removes from our homes.*

Sabes de que gringos, a la chingada con America. No voy a trabajar como un pinche animal,
mejor me compro unos paquetes de polvo y yerba para vender a todos los pen-celebrós aquí.

Yo voy a vivir como Rey, pinche gabacho America.

CHAPTER IV

BREAKING AWAY FROM THE STREETS

The Beauty of the Blossom

Once, only a tiny brown seed
planted in the earth's womb.

Clouds squeezed like a sponge
and water
 falls
 to the floors.

The tiny seed releases its tentacles,
reach and whine for light to feed
sucking the sky's breast-less nipple.

From youth to growth, the newborn
 stands alone

waging war with rough winds.

When clouds don't come
the blossom weeps for earth
to provide light and water.

For weeks the blossom tears.

Then, roots rejoice in praise
that the heavens provided

wets and shines. Once again,

behold the beauty of blossoms.

Before Bliss

Before the fucking broncs became vaqueros.
Before my mother could smile at Gabriel Leal

in bold letters, on documents without
an underlined cause for my arrest.

I had a degree in slit-my-wrist-ology.

Wrapped in a loyal-red East Side flag,
Pharr-o-lito granted me gifts on Bell Street.

Small plastic ten-dollar baggies filled
with white devil-dust, nice little bow on top.

Yes. I will deliver to all who
will die-or-need them enjoy
 waiting.

I learned that some streets cannot
be crossed without pistol-for-passage passes.

Before I picked up Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*
and Salinas's *Un Trip through the Mind Jail*,

I knew how blades were used to poke and pull
out the steel that flows through hearts.

Before writer workshop circles with voices suggesting

No. Yes. Maybe cut this line.
I don't understand this. Can you?

Before this, I had a diploma. Granted upon
walking down the cold concrete corridors

inside Hotel Hidalgo County. No family
at this ceremony, just a tank of babosos del barrio,

who follow the Street Constitution:

WE the Vatos del Barrio, in order to create a more trucha clika, establish injustice, ensure domestic instabilities, provide proper bullets and vests for defense, promote capitans to generals who will secure Santuaries of Insanity to esquinas and prospectos, do disdain and establish a twelve foot hole in the United East Side Streets of America.

Before prose and poems entered my journals,
twenty-four dicks slept in designated bunk-beds.

Would you like to feel how screwdrivers work
on skin to poke holes in stomach, skull, and arms?

Because before this, five vatos in a Blue Grand Prix
chased me as I walked alone through dark streets,

after I had punched and choked my father because
he wouldn't stop screaming at me. My head's bigger
than a baseball, but these vatos thought they should take

a swing. The bat didn't break my face. I managed
to take it away. Death will not preserve my life.

Another Sin Saved for Sunday

Another snort of cocaine crumbles
my hands—I can't write a word with my pen.

Another page is blank space like
a poem I wanted to write titled *Love*.

Another gate shut and shackled behind me
just another spic placed in hand cuffs.

Another sign directing our worlds.
Stop, go, yield, detour, obey all limits.

Another sin saved for church on Sunday.

Another mirror reflecting who I might be.
Is this the real me? I'm Gabriel. Soy Gabriel.

Another sunrise. Another sunset.
This fucking sky never seems to age.

Another chinga tu madre came out my car's
mouth on the way to class at UTRGV.

Another mind broken by *art thou* in books.
Dammit. Shank-speare? Again Professor?

Another scar for speaking Marx with
homies. I am taught lies in college.

Another back, gone willingly out the door.
The professor's lecture remains seated.

Another line and my thoughts will explode!

Let the debris become seeds,
planted in libraries occupied by

Rio Grande Valley Raza.

The Cruci-fiction of Christ

He preaches that guns should
be wall hangers. His word is
heard and followed when his eyes

are closed, but he can foresee tongues
being chewed, spit, and swallowed.
Stars implode and sinners walk

with him. Their hands full of gold bullets,
they want him nailed to cross-hairs for
the belief that bullets should be banned.

His body is hot, shot as they applaud
while chants chill the air *Crucify him!*
Crucify him! Stitch his mouth shut.

*We shall pay for the thread with money
made from the sales of metals that spit fire.*
Mansions are built. A stray bullet hit a child.

Guns are shovels digging graves. He dies
for those who live life behind triggers.
After life. He melts his heart to create

an arsenal of aerial missiles to ash
those who made bank off his bones.
In his name he cursed them to live with

their eyelids engraved with their victims' faces.

Windows Nailed Shut

Eyes covered with bloody bandanas
the barrios have no eyes or tongue,
but can deliver tears to our memories.
Mouths like windows nailed shut.

Barrios have no eyes or tongue.
Carnales plot to kick down doors.
Mouths like windows nailed shut.
How many nails will slip out justified?

Carnales plot to drop down doors.
No remorse, just give up drugs and loot.
How many nails will slip out justified
when prisons cannot control murderers?

Mothers blame men with six-shooters
for the tears that flood the funerals.
Why can't peace officers control murders
before the dirt takes the bodies?

During the flood at the funerals
everyone manages to keep dry.
When the dirt greets the bodies
no one asks the grounds why.

Everyone managed to keep dry.
Death takes life, life offers death.
Nobody asks the grounds, where
is heaven? Does it exist when we die?

Death makes life and life made death,
both bring tears to our eyes.
Heaven. Do you exist when we die
blindfolded by bloody bandanas?

How will you live when you die?

The smooth sound of black blood on paper.
My pen drips dots of my life you can connect
in order to comprehend the motives behind
the creation of complex compositions. Listen, laugh,
learn knowing that you are reading my tears
dried with purpose, at my convenience.

You can read my words if you find convenience,
eyes gliding left to right across our paper.
You are holding my loose leaf tears
in your eyes, my desire is to connect
and possibly produce a cry or laugh,
so I know you are not too far behind.

When we speak I choose to hide behind
a tongue-less mouth, calibrate your convenience.
Identify the sources that generate laugh,
instead of writing to waste precious paper.
I wish to possess the ability to connect
even after the flood of my family's tears

at my funeral. Use our page to dry your tears
and know my voice could never be left behind.
I struggle while striving to connect
my tongue with your ears. Convenience?
Do you have reason to tear my papers?
Trying to forget the sound of my laugh?

I would not wonder why. I would laugh
knowing that I was able to touch your tears
by putting my pen to paper.
After our demise, what will we leave behind?
Will our death be the world's convenience?
Writing will allow me to connect

with the living through death, connect
the dead and the living. Sheets laugh
as my pen creates custom convenience
for words to fall on my page like tears
and show the world the individual behind
the white mask of my paper.

At our convenience, my pen's tears
connect us for a miserable little laugh

our past left behind on a piece of paper.

I kneel and ask the sky where heaven is found

I kneel and ask the sky where heaven is found
because bible didn't provide a map.
Where is my soul when my body is underground?

When accepted do angels harp heavenly sound,
Can I still listen to fuck-the-world rap?
I kneel and ask the sky where heaven is found.

Will I arrive lost and alone having to feel my way around?
Are clouds solid-gold streets or can I fall through cracks?
Where is my soul when my body is underground?

Will god need a copy of my criminal background?
Will I be dropped through satan's furnace trap?
I kneel and ask the sky where heaven is found.

As a child I hated seeing my mother frown.
Will that still make me want to permanently nap?
Where is my soul when my body is underground?

I wonder if my soul will lose pounds.
I don't want to be another piece of scrap.
I kneel and ask the sky where heaven is found.
Where is my soul when my body is underground?

Prayer for God's Earth

We survive off frijoles from salvage dirt on god's earth.
We kneel to confess to clouds believing all's well on god's earth.

Dark days roar in the light of bright skies that want to cry.
Bring beauty to the blossoms burnt black on god's earth.

Rise beautiful light and shine from your circular furnace.
Give green to the sea of the brown dried desert on god's earth.

Lift the blood stained feet that drag against polished floors.
Cleanse the bodies under the ripped shirt of god's earth.

Take me how I am or leave me in a puddle of piss.
Our father, I flirt with possibilities of heaven on god's earth.

Give me some bread that I can chew—do you look for me
as I look for you? I'm just a man wandering god's earth.

My Sins. My Sanity.

My lips are stitched so my tongue can't escape.
Trapped in the skins of suicide.

I slit my tendons with a swift slash. Out flows
a stream of broken commandments.

A dam must be built with holy fire to halt
the rush of reds turning black. Natural disaster.

Demons and laughter. My sanity has been
sucked out of my ears, but I can still hear voices.

Life in a shaft. The walls
shake and shift and suddenly
I am straddling the borders of sin and salvation.

I am trying to chisel my way out with a handle-less hammer.
Still stuck. I can barely lift the head of this hammer.

The devil is a shameless savage
who created a superior sinner, capable of carving

a frown through a smile.
I leave my heart to lay in a slumber of shadows,

to dwell in a world of eternal eclipse.

The Metal Fangs of Matrimony

The mouth open,

 waiting to unionize Mr. Fucked
 and Ms. From-This-Day-Forward.

A stapler regulates distribution,

 spitting metal fangs, that will join
 two legal-love documents,

stapler is squeezed after hearing two tongues
say the words *I do.*

The mouth closes,

 it compresses and contracts, then
 two fangs follow joining edges.

Without a hand to work the device,

 there is no white one-night dress
 there is no over-priced diamond ring,

no laughing, dancing, singing, kissing, hugging,
late-night fucking, drinking, smoking, leaving, staying.

Without the hand there is nothing. Nada. Zero.

Is there anyone who would wish to sever this hand?

If so, speak now or forever join their peace.

An Ocean Full of Dicks and Docks

I found my wife's wedding ring
drowning in white seamen

banging the bottom of a beer bottle.
The diamonds remain in their compartments,

but their glimmer ravaged.
Both my knees bleed from begging

for a portion of your pussy tonight,
because beneath the ocean, your dock

opens to be cocked by foreign ships.
You say I always sail away. I say

I sail to fill us with food, not dick.
My dick dangles desperate, so

I was going to dock into a different,
but I only have an anchor for you.

Teaching Fish How to Swim

I greet you all for the first time
dressed to cover my tattooed body,
but I speak with a barrio background.

Your eyes are wide wondering what a shark
with so many scars is doing trying to teach.
So I tell you how I moved from the block

to the books, to a writing instructor in college.
My seat wasn't as soft as some of yours.
My desk was rough, cold, and confined.

I couldn't tell you how to be a great writer,
but I could tell you how we all grow
through practice. I was you, so confide in me.

I may corrupt your ideas with questions
about choices you make when writing.
These questions may confuse you, but that's fine.

We will develop your skills and confidence together.
As I watch you all learn, my shark's heart grows.
I keep a razor smile because I instruct

and I can tell you learn. You'll never drown.
When you leave this tank of a classroom you will
swim comfortably with a pen and a brain that grew.

I only gave you some tips. You all will survive on your own.

Natural Toxicity of Love

The brown blood inside me
has committed itself
to bleed in black, marking

you blank space with pen-scars.

I lost you in a backpack,
but I know you'd resurface,
waiting for me to unleash you.

I miss our minutes together.

We paint portraits of the RGV
that are brown and black. Brown is raza.
Black is what I bleed with my pen.

The roll of your point tickles
each page we flip.

We share smiles, frowns, tears,
blood, and bandages.

Clichés make me want to rip
the white and wipe my brown ass.

When I leave you, the next sheet
waits for your black ink to bleed brown.

Procrastination

Sit here. Stuck in a chair. Wheels rusted.

No back support.

Broken brain. Blank screen.
Too much cushion. No comfort.

Blinking vertical I of the cursor.
The pulse in the paper.

Every two words. Ten blinks.

Stand up. Walk around.

Sit back down. Wordless frowns.
A sip of my race to wake. Brown beans
in a foam cup.

Calendar cut with X's. No time.
Need air. Or another brain.

Gears broken. Process prolonged.

Fuck this, in five minutes I'm going home.

New Life. New Friends.

Can't really hang with the homies anymore.

They're rotting in earth's tomb, or
Had names changed to a number:

Inmate C-67197.

Texas State Property. Might be
selling dope trying to save up for bail.

I'm still from the barrio, but only at distance.

I have a new family with CV's that
show the power of brains and hearts.

La vida loca will always live with me.

I regret the fists that left bruises,
the guns that shot without direction,
the knives that pierced out of pride.

I will use the dead, the tears and torcidos,
Turn them to poems
for my people who are forced and consumed

by the lust for a feared respect.

Happy Home

After the first year I couldn't
see our house with a well-kept yard.

I thought it would be better to separate.
I wanted to live my life alone and drink

the same liquor, snort the same coke,
smoke the same weed.

The thought of a ring cutting the circulation
of my finger made me want to end our union.

Now, when I am with you I see no end,
unless my hand is held by yours.

You opened the doors, but I kept them shut.

I only kept them open if
I could drink and light up.

So many tears from your eyes made
me realize I couldn't and wouldn't

continue to hurt you.

I made myself make sure you
only cry when you are smiling.

A little mutt named Miloh lays
in our bed everyday. I used to say

I would never let a dog sleep with us,
but my discomfort has calmed because

each day our love grows like the roots
of an oak tree, it's too hard to try to pull

them out, so I don't attempt to do so.

Together we've accomplished what I
would've never done alone. A tiny home

grown bigger, grass is greener, a car that
isn't sick. Together my half heart is whole.

Cleansing Bad Relationships

You worthless motherfucker.

My mother would always tell me this.
The only woman to force a fist to my face.

The only woman I touched with
intention to leave bruises on her body.

She used to go out and drink a lot.
I used to stay home and smoke pot.

Then, I adapted stronger habits.
Whiskey, roaches, and lines of cocaine.

I wanted my body's functions to fail.
Kidney failure, gastritis, and a hernia.

I almost died, but I survived.

The pain was so deep. These experiences
are cherished because now our love is strong.

No more death follows when I leave the house.
No more *fuck you mom* when I scream.
No more organs fail me.

Just a mother and son saying *I love you*
every night before we go to sleep.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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