

"*Nobody's Son* is a story of the people who saved a writer and his voice. . . . This is a book about America and one of its sons. Savor it. Read it in one furious sitting. Then read it again—slowly."—Benjamin Saenz

"*Nobody's Son* is a poetic journey into the expansive Chicano heart. . . . Haunted by flight into the USA, Urrea finally proclaims his identity, our common identity. This book shines with genius."—Rudolfo Anaya

"*Nobody's Son* is a smart, witty, hip, and at times heartbreakingly honest memoir. . . . His language is vivid and intelligent, but most importantly, compassionate."—Terry Tempest Williams

"More than just a memory of people and places in Mexico, but a commentary on these United States—our language, our culture. I commend him for the pure style of his prose and the reaffirmation of the American Story."—Ernest J. Gaines

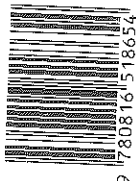
Luis Urrea is one of those great comedians whose favorite material is pain—in this case the sweet pain of family, self, and his two beautiful, infuriating countrymen. *Nobody's Son* is funky as hell, sad as love, and funny as death."—Stewart O'Nan

Urrea's sheer verbal energy and speed are dazzling. . . . *Nobody's Son* is both contemporary and completely classic."—Richard Shelton

Urrea is a writer of the first rank, and this book deserves a wide and grateful audience."—Robert Boswell

*Nobody's Son* is tough, beautiful, turbulent, and often astonishing. . . . This is a work to cherish, reread often, and give to friends and relatives as an offering of joy, understanding, and grace."—John Nichols

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nobody's son

luis alberto urrea

nobody's son

notes from an american life

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THRIFTBOOKS

"This book shines with genius."—Rudolfo Anaya

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My father, a Mexican, thought: *gringos*.

I, for one, think *They* are the ones with the words. You know, the Words. The ones they called my dad and me—like *wetback*. *Spic*. *Beaner*. *Greaser*. *Pepper-belly*. *Yellow-belly*. *Taco-bender*. *Enchilada-breath*.

That was my wife's phrase. She thought it was cute. She's gone now.

So is my mom.

"Dad?" I said. "What's a greaser?"

He used to tell me I was no *God-damned gringo*. I was, however, white. *Speak Spanish, pendejo!* was a common cry when I spoke some unacceptable English phrase. Utterly forbidden English in our house included many taboos, among them: *my old man* (he was sure this was disrespectful and implied he wasn't a virile young thing); *big daddy* (he was certain this meant big penis); *you're kidding* (another disrespect, suggesting he didn't tell the truth at all times—he didn't); *easy rider* (he thought this meant a man married to a whore); *chicano* (from chicanery).

His only word for *them* was *gringo*. He didn't see it as all that bad. He said it came from the Mexican-American War. The pop hit the American soldiers sang in those days was "Green Grow the Lilacs." Green grows *gringos*. It seemed altogether benign compared to yellow bellies.

I had been called "greaser" by the son of a retired Navy petty officer in my new, all-white neighborhood. We had fled from the ethnic cleansing taking place in Shelltown, California, to which we had hurried from Tijuana. I couldn't

quite fathom the name. Surely I wasn't greasy? But I *felt* greasy. And the vivid image of grease, of some noxious *Mexican* grease, collided in my mind with the word "wet-back." And suddenly I was certain that my back was wet with grease. A grease I couldn't see. I had an image in my mind of the back of my shirt soaked through with cooking oil and sticking to me, glistening sickeningly in the sun. Everybody could see the grease drooling down my spine. Except me.

My father was whiter than my mother. If he had become an American citizen, he would have voted for Nixon. Twice. Most Mexican immigrants—both "legal" and "illegal"—would vote Republican if given a chance, except the Republicans scare them, so they're forced to support the Clintons and Carters of this nation. It has been estimated that by 2050, Latinos will be the majority population of the world. Not only will America be "brown," but it will also be the home of the new Democrats. The Institutional Revolutionary Catholic Democratic Party ticket of John Kennedy Jr. and Edward James Olmos will sweep the elections. The paradigm will shift, as they say: the bogeyman will become the *chupacabras*. Bullfights at the county fair. Baja California will be the fifty-first state. The Buchanan Brigade Aryan Militia will mount an offensive in the Malibu Hills, holding nineteen gardeners and twelve nannies hostage. NASA will land the first lowrider on the moon. Just watch.

"Greaser," my father replied.

I believe he had prepared himself for this. On our first

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day in the neighborhood, he'd been chased out of our driveway by an irate white man. You don't spend two decades living as a Mexican guest of Southern California without becoming fully aware of the genocidal urge that percolates in the human heart.

Dad transformed before my eyes into a college lecturer.

"During the Americans' westward expansion," he intoned, "the settlers traveled in covered wagons. When they reached the West—Arizona, Texas, California—they often needed repair work done on their wagons after such a long hard trip. A large part of this work consisted of *greasing* the axles, which had dried out. The only ones who had the skill to fix the wagons were Mexicans. Mexicans greased the axles. You see? *Greasers*. So when they call you that, hold your head up. It's a badge of honor. We helped build America."

He's gone now, too.

The last time I was interviewed by the Mexican press, I was in Mexico City, the self-appointed home of all true Mexicans. I was startled to find out that I was not a true Mexican. I was any number of things: I was an American, I was "just" a Chicano, I was a *norteño* (which, in Mexico City, is like saying you're one of the Mongol horde). I was lauded for speaking Spanish "just like" a Mexican, or chided for having what amounted to a cowboy accent. That I was born in Tijuana didn't matter a bit: Tijuana, I was informed, is no-man's-land. Mexicans don't come from Tijuana. Tijuans come from Tijuana.

That I was an American citizen was apparently a *faux pas*. That I wrote in English was an insult. That I was blue-eyed, however, allowed me to pass for Mexican high society.

I will say this for Mexico City, though: people in La Capital have perfect manners. For all its travails and crises, Mexico City is the most civil city I've ever visited. Imagine a city where a cabbie returns your tip to you because you've paid him too much for his services. Imagine this same city reporting a stunning 700 assaults every day.

In the great museum, you can see a famous Aztec mask. One half of it is a smiling face. The other half is a skull.

I was told by the editor of the newspaper to be out of town by the time the interview appeared. Someone somewhere decided that what I had to say was somehow dangerous. I thought this was a joke. Then an editor took me to the foyer where several of the paper's reporters had been executed. *All I'm saying*, I protested, *is that poor people should be treated with respect*. She lit a cigarette and said, *Be out of town*.

Things that seemed perfectly clear to me turned confusing and opaque.

In the interview, I offered the often-quoted comment from *By the Lake of Sleeping Children* that I, as a son of the border, had a barbed-wire fence neatly bisecting my heart. The border, in other words, ran through me. The journalist said, "Aha!" and scribbled with real vigor.

When the article came out, however, the comment had

been transformed. I'm still not sure what it means. It said: "If you were to cut Urrea's heart open, you would find a border patrol truck idling between his ribs."

I was going to write, "Meanwhile, back home . . ." But where is home? Home isn't just a place, I have learned. It is also a language. My words not only shape and define my home. Words—not only for writers—are home. Still, where exactly is that?

Jimmy Santiago Baca reminds us that "Hispanics" are immigrants in our own land. By the time Salem was founded on Massachusetts Bay, any number of Urreas had been prowling up and down the Pacific coast of our continent for several decades. Of course, the Indian mothers of these families had been here from the start. But manifest destiny took care of us all—while we greased the wheels.

Them wagons is still rollin'.

I saw a hand-lettered sign on television. It was held up by a woman in stretch pants and curlers, and it said: America For Americans. A nearby man held up a sign exhorting the universe to speak English or go home.

*The official language of the United States.*

Well, sure. We speak English and, apparently, Ebonics. I want to call Chicano slang Aztonics while we're at it. *Orale*, Homes—we down, *¿qué no?* Simón, *vato*—let's trip out the *rucas* of the school board, *ese! Ese torcido rifa, locos!*

It's all English. Except for the alligator, which is a Spanish word. Lariat, too, is a Spanish word.

In fact, here's a brief list, in no particular order. It might

help you score points in a trivia parlor game someday. All words borrowed from Spanish:

Chaps  
Savvy  
Palaver  
Hoosegow  
Palomino  
Coyote  
Pinto  
Marijuana  
Vamoose  
Stampede  
Buckaroo  
Adobe  
Saguaro  
Rodeo  
Ranch  
Rancher  
Patio  
Key (as in Florida Keys)  
Florida  
Sarsaparilla  
Navajo  
Nevada  
Machete  
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- Calaboose
- Canyon
- Colorado
- Fandango
- Foofaraw
- Guacamole
- Hackamore
- Beef jerky
- Lasso
- Abalone
- Vanilla
- Chocolate
- Cigar

For example. Perfectly acceptable English. Nary an Aztonic word in sight.

You don't believe me about beef jerky, do you? I find it a little hard to believe, my own self. What's more American than a hunk of jerky? Cowboys, rednecks, crackers, wrestlers, mountain men gnaw away on planks of jerked beef!

Winfred Blevins, in the marvelous *Dictionary of the American West*, notes: "The word is an Americanized version of the Spanish term for jerked meat, *charqui*."

I don't know what we're going to do. Forget about purifying the American landscape, sending all those ethnic types packing back to their homelands. Those illegal humans. (A straw-hat fool in a pickup truck once told my Sioux brother

Duane to go back where he came from. "Where to?" Duane called. "South Dakota?")

The humanoids are pretty bad, but how will we get rid of all those pesky foreign *words* debilitating the United States?

Those Turkish words (like *coffee*). Those French words (like *maroon*). Those Greek words (like *cedar*). Those Italian words (like *marinate*). Those African words (like *marimba*).

English! It's made up of all these untidy *words*, man. Have you noticed?

Native American (*skunk*), German (*waltz*), Danish (*twerp*), Latin (*adolescent*), Scottish (*feckless*), Dutch (*waft*), Caribbean (*zombie*), Nahuatl (*ocelot*), Norse (*walrus*), Eskimo (*kayak*), Tatar (*horde*) words! It's a glorious *wreck* (a good old Viking word, that).

Glorious, I say, in all of its shambling mutable beauty. People daily speak a quilt work of words, and continents and nations and tribes and even enemies dance all over your mouth when you speak. The tongue seems to know no race, no affiliation, no breed, no caste, no order, no genus, no lineage. The most dedicated Klansman spews the language of his adversaries while reviling them.

It's all part of the American palaver and squawk.

*Seersucker*: Persian.

*Sandalwood*: Sanskrit.

Grab a dictionary. It's easy. You at home—play along.

The \$64,000 question for tonight: What the hell are we

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speaking? What language (culture, color, race, ethnicity) is this anyway? Who are we?

*Abbott:* Aramaic.

*Yo-yo:* Philippino.

*Muslin:* Iraqi.

*Yogurt:* Turkish.

I love words so much. Thank God so many people lent us theirs or we'd be forced to point and grunt. When I start to feel the pressure of the border on me, when I meet someone who won't shake my hand because she has suddenly discovered I'm half Mexican (as happened with a landlady in Boulder), I comfort myself with these words. I know how much color and beauty we Others really add to the American mix.

My advice to anyone who wants to close the border and get them Messkins out is this: *don't dare start counting how many of your words are Latin, Baby.*

America—there's a Mexican in the woodpile.

## II

Poor Old Ma.

That's what she called herself. She'd sign letters, "Your Poor Old Ma." She was anything but rustic. It amused her *New Yorker* wit to be seen as Ma Kettle among the California hicks and savages. If she'd had her way, she would have worn white gloves every day, and I would have been called Lewis, and I would have called her "Mother Dear."

Her name was Phyllis. (A Greek word, don't you know. It means "the green branch.") She married my dad, Alberto (an Old English name—Aethelberht meaning "noble, brilliant"), in San Francisco's city hall. It was sometime in the late forties or early fifties. My mother had, she often said, "never even *seen* a Mexican." (A Nahuatl word, the ancient name of the Aztec tribe, Mexica.) My father was not only blond and blue-eyed, but he was in uniform and a devil on the dance floor. Even though it was a Mexican uniform, my mother was a fool for that military cut, having served long and dangerous years in Europe during the war. Her heroes remained soldiers, men in her eyes brave and noble and almost unbearably touching. She had seen enough men die and suffer to make of each uniform a small haunting. (Haunt: Old French.)

Alberto was on the presidential staff of Mexico. He had a lot of gold buttons, a couple of medals, and captain's stripes. So did she.

He lived in the presidential palace in Mexico City. He drove a black Cadillac with the number two on the plates. (Número uno, of course, was the president's black Cadillac—despots have always liked a long black car.) Dad spent his free hours zooming over the mountains to Cuernavaca on a huge military Harley. He had access to the president's train, and he regularly flew in the president's DC-3. He had an aunt in San Francisco, and he flew there on occasion to buy jazz and swing 78s.

He tried to look like Erroll Flynn; she looked (to him) like Merle Oberon.