

# DoubleTake



# There



LUIS ALBERTO URREA

## *Dompe Days*

Over the last five years, writer Luis Alberto Urrea and photographer Jack Lueders-Booth have worked independently to record the lives of the people in communities that surround the garbage dumps of Tijuana.

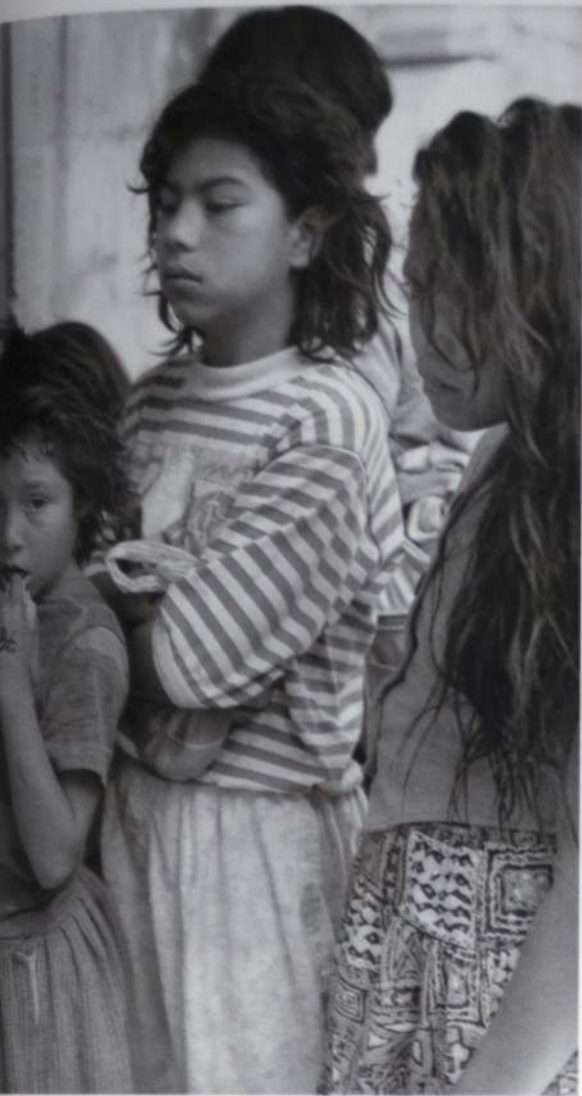
Nobody knew what happened to the boys' parents. Not even the boys—Chacho, Elijio, Carlos, and Jorge—could explain what had happened to them. As is so often the case in Tijuana, one day the boys woke up and their parents were gone. Papa had apparently gone across the wire, into the U.S. Mama blew away like a puff of smoke. The four brothers were alone in the Tijuana garbage dump.

For a few nights, the younger boys wept as Chacho, the fierce elder brother, pulled together a small homestead amidst the garbage. They went hungry for a while, not having any dump survival skills. The trash pickers gave them what food they could spare, but that wasn't much. And missionaries came into the dump with goodies, but Chacho didn't trust *gringos*, so he kept the boys away. Besides, the *gringos* gave baths, and nobody was going to get Chacho naked.

One day, an old man appeared in the dump. He wore grimy old suits and had no past and no home. His left arm had come out of the socket years before, and he had wandered, half-crippled, from dump to dump, looking for young people to care for him. Chacho struck a bargain with him: if he would look out for the younger boys, then Chacho and Elijio would pick trash for them all. They had a new family unit.

The old man set up shop in an upended Maytag appliance box. Inside, the boys slept with him on a mat of newspaper and cardboard. They used cast-off clothes scavenged from the dump for blankets. The old man spent much of each day inside, where he often wept.

He had a passion for avocados, and he could often be found in a green puddle of muddy guacamole, drunk, and sprawled in the fruit.



Chacho set up his own small shack on a low rise above the trash. There, he acquired a pistol. Then, he stole a pony from an outlying ranch and built it a corral made of bed-springs and stolen wood. His brothers began attending the *gringo* bathing sessions, and Elijio brought home animals—unwanted puppies, piglets swiped or bartered. Chacho used his horse to steal cows.

**T**he old man moved on. He tied his floppy arm to his side with twine and rags, set his straw hat on his head, and wandered off with what few things he could muster in a plastic bag. Elijio, Carlos, and Jorge were working the trash and came home to a silent box.

They went to Chacho, but Chacho was now a *pistolero* at twelve, too tough and macho to care. He told them to take care of themselves, that life was shit, that the broth-

ers needed no one. So the boys went back to their box and crawled in alone.

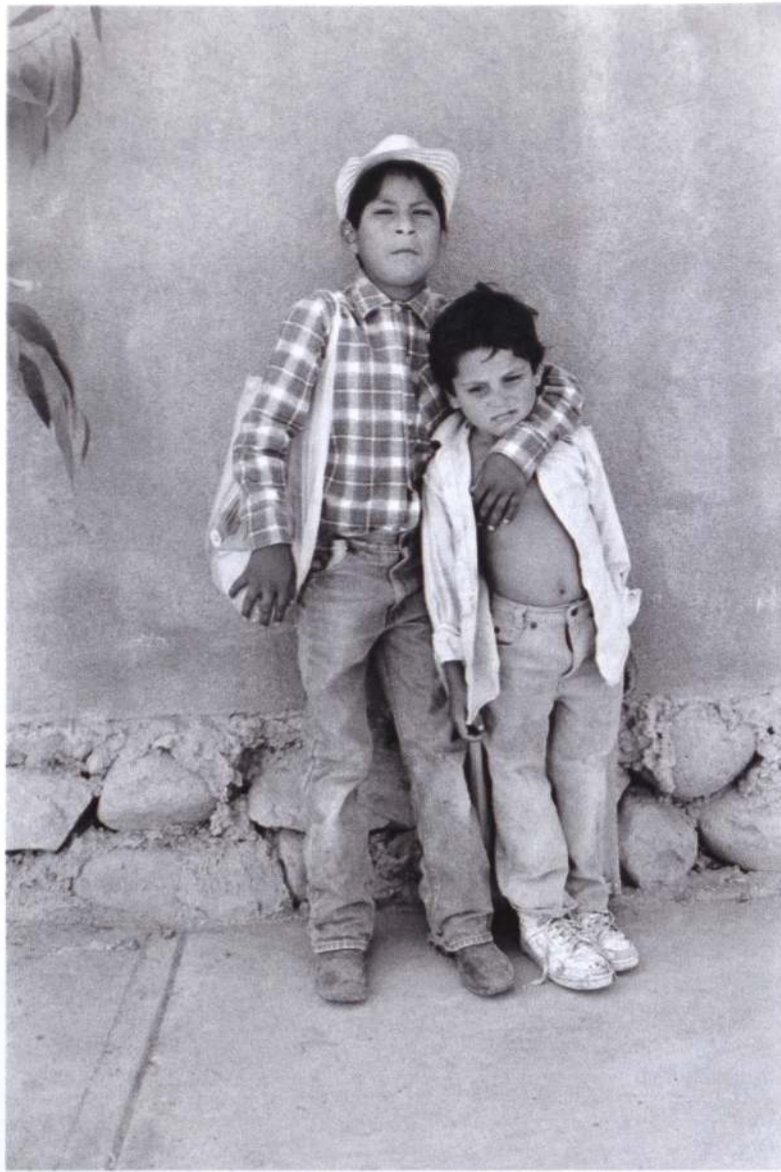
Soon, they were used to it. Elijio, being the next oldest, kept watch over them. And Chacho, their legendary big brother, also watched them from his elevated compound. People knew to leave the boys alone, or Chacho would be there with his pistol. When he cut up a calf, he gave them meat. When there was money, he bought them Cokes. And he herded them to the baths every two weeks, where only one of them would submit to the water, but they all took home bags of doughnuts.

**B**oys in the dump have their own playground of sorts. There is always something to do. Collecting trash is always hard work, yet it offers endlessly changing collections of strangeness. The boys could find clothes sometimes, or tins of food, water-damaged pornography,

LEFT TO RIGHT: Fausto González Barrio, 1993

Girls waiting for showers, Fausto González Barrio, 1992

Burning old gravesite flowers, Fausto González Barrio, 1993



LEFT TO RIGHT: Brothers, Pan América Barrio, 1993. Husband and wife, Fausto González Barrio, 1994. Feeding the dogs, Fausto González Barrio, 1992

and even toys cast out by the *ricos* in the Tijuana hills. Once they even found a load of fetuses dumped in the trash by the city. “Dead babies,” everyone was saying. “They left dead babies in the dump.” People were afraid, able only to envision some desperately evil deed that would kill so many infants. To the boys, raised in squalor, the most squalid details became, by default, entertaining.

Although Elijio loved animals, the sight of a diseased dog being eaten alive by a pack of other dogs was exciting.

There were always rats to kill, fires to set, food to steal. They could spy on the women when they went off to the side to urinate. And there were always drunks getting in fights: women beating each other up in rolling tangles, men flashing knives.

They even had their own private lake. On the hill above Chacho’s horse pen, the city had built a huge *pila* to hold water for the community on the other, civilized, side of the dump hill. The part of the reservoir

above ground was the size of a warehouse, and it didn’t take long for the boys to break through the cement block corner at the top and climb in. They gathered inside the shadowy structure and swam in the water, diving from the maintenance catwalks and floating in the city’s water supply.

Of course, the one game they most loved and that everyone—from Chacho to the Mixtec Indians—warned them away from, was the most dangerous. The boys loved to ride the backs of garbage trucks.

**E**lijio thought he had a firm grip on the big ugly truck. Retired from San Diego, the truck was heavy with trash, its hunched back dark and rusty, its smokestack belching black smoke. The boys had spent the morning running up behind the trucks as they entered the dump and hopping on the back ends, hanging on to the handholds the garbagemen used. Sometimes they clung to the sides like little spiders, swinging over the wheel wells as the trucks banged over trash mounds.

Elijio had run behind the truck, flung himself at it and grabbed the edge of the open maw in back. The other boys shouted good-natured insults: “Faggot!” and “Coward!” He turned once to laugh at them, hanging on with one hand and starting to signal to them. The truck slammed on its brakes. Elijio swung sharply forward, smacked into the truck and bounced off, falling on his back. The truck ground its gears and lurched into reverse. The boys yelled for Elijio to get out of the way. Carlos and Jorge stood staring. Elijio tried to scramble out on his back, but he was already bruised from hitting the metals and falling. He could barely move. The truck’s vast double-axled rear wheels rolled up his body and over his chest, all eight wheels crushing him to death.

The truck driver shut off the engine and hopped out to unload the trash. He couldn’t figure out why all the boys were screaming.



**T**he dump people don't always knit together. Sheer survival makes it difficult to look out for their fellows. But death sometimes unites them. If the death is sad enough.

Everyone knew Elijio's story. They had all said at one time or another that someone should do something about those boys, but nobody had done much. Now, they were resolved to make good in death.

They came up with the money to buy Elijio a small suit. Some of the Mixtec men collected raw particleboard and hammered together a coffin. They set it inside the dirt-floor shack where the *gringos* had been bathing the kids. The wife of one of them took Jorge and Carlos in among her own brood. She had given birth to her last child in this same shack, cutting the umbilical cord herself with a steak knife.

Chacho took a bath. He stuck his pistol into his belt, got drunk, and wailed over Elijio. All the tough guys in the dump lost it over the boy. None of them knew how to deal

with this tragedy—it was somehow worse than the other tragedies. The men wept openly, inconsolably.

Ironically, a busload of fresh-faced American Jesus-Teens pulled up and unloaded thirty happy campers to Minister To The Poor. The Mexicans stood away from them and muttered amongst themselves. Their youth pastor sent the *gringo* kids inside the shack in small groups to see what life was really like. After they'd all looked in on the crushed Elijio, they mounted their bus and motored off, some other Good Works no doubt awaiting them elsewhere.

Jorge, the youngest brother, stayed outside the shack, playing marbles. He didn't show the least interest in Elijio's corpse. As Chacho stood beside the coffin, crying out his pain, Carlos snuck in and peered at the body. He reached out and prodded Elijio's face with his fingers, apparently to make sure his brother was really dead. He went outside and joined the marble game.

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TOP: Dressing for a christening, Pan América Barrio, 1991

BOTTOM: Fausto González Barrio, 1993

The men of the dump hammered a lid onto the box and carried it outside. They mounted it in the back of a pickup. Chacho and the boys rode with the box. Directly behind the pickup was a flatbed, filled to capacity with standing men. The men passed a bottle. Bringing up the rear was a lone *gringo* van, with a couple of missionaries.

The procession headed off across the hills, into a region not seen by *gringos*, where there were no roads. They drove up a hill, where the dump people had created their own graveyard. Little crosses made of sticks dotted the sere hill. Bits of fancy garbage decorated a few graves.

"It's boot hill," the pastor said.

The men traded turns with the shovel, cracking, then scraping out the rocky soil. It took quite a while to make the hole, but between them they managed it.

They manhandled the box into it and stood around looking at it. Chacho almost fell in, he cried so hard. The men quietly went to work, pushing dirt and rocks back into the hole. Others who couldn't get close to the shoveling, went from grave to grave, pulling dry weeds and picking up paper. Some of the crosses needed straightening. A couple of guys made borders of rock around unmarked graves.

Jorge never went close to the grave. But if you paid close attention, you could see Carlos moving in behind Chacho. He peeked out from between Chacho's legs. Then, at the last possible moment, he grabbed a little handful of dust and pitched into the hole. ■

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