

CARLOS ANDRÉS GÓMEZ

HIJITO

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Introduction

At a time of crisis and fragmentation in this country, we need poets who will see our common humanity and speak to that humanity without resorting to the dead language of cliché. At a time when violence in this society is not only epidemic but enormously profitable, we need poets who will speak out against violence in all its manifestations, from the internalized lessons of youth to the brute force of the state. At a time when racial stereotypes—slandering those of Latin American origin or descent—influence social policy and public opinion in the U.S., we need poets whose very existence erases such stereotypes. In short, we need poets like Carlos Andrés Gómez.

The reader or listener encountering the poems in *Hijito* might expect this poet to recall his own experiences with street violence in general and gun violence in particular. Indeed, by fifteen he had seen too much, and would go on to witness a dear friend broken in a flash of rage; by twenty-three, as a social worker in Harlem, he would save a pimp from being shot by an irate john, coming perilously close to taking the bullet himself in the bargain. These poems are visceral, the stinging slap of memory jolting us awake.

However, what the reader or listener would never anticipate is the leap from such quotidian violence in this country—birthed in the blood of conquest—to the horrors of the genocide in Rwanda, as the poet does in two indelible poems contained herein. This is the kind of leap that requires vision, and, indeed, this poet is a visionary humanist, seeing bridges where others see

only the deepest of waters, a spectrum of violence met with resistance to violence, a commitment to peace through poetry that goes beyond the rhetoric of peace practiced by those in power.

Through it all, Carlos Andrés Gómez navigates the meanings of Latino maleness in an age when President Trump whips his minions into a fury over the “bad hombres” menacing the fragile borders of the United States. Whether he writes of his father or himself as a father, in poem after poem, this poet asks the tough question: *what is a man?* The answer, invariably, springs from a commitment to changing the world.

That he meets these challenges with strong images and lyrical grace is extraordinary. As he says in his poem, “Morning, Riker’s Island,” about the adolescents incarcerated there: “here’s the miracle: / the sun frees everyone / to sing.” The words of this poet free everyone to sing. As Brecht put it: “In the dark times / Will there also be singing? / Yes, there will also be singing / About the dark times.” All we have to do now is listen.

Martín Espada
June, 2019

Hijito

for Michael Brown

I am enthralled by the image
in front of me: my face overlaid
with his—a boy, almost a man, inside
the glass of a grocery store
reaching for a branch
of seedless grapes.

This sly mirror. This taut mirage.
A coiling limb slithers in my gut, its roots
(invisible)—like I am on this asphalt
to any soul that is inside, right now,
like he is. Today, she is
nine weeks along, he is almost eighteen,
and I am grasping for any thought
that is not my son calling out breathless
from the hollow lungs of night, abandoned
seven feet from the hood of a patrol car
where a hubcap swallows secrets
beside a pavement-choked throat
heaving for breath (his jawline borrowed
from my face). Above it, a still-shaking
hand crowned by smoke uniformed
in my skin.

Pronounced

You excavate anything that has tried to lodge itself
in your body without permission. You bury the toothbrush
between your back molars and scrape whatever

you find. One loss makes you feel all other losses.
Eleven years later, when you no longer eat pizza
or speak Spanish, when your father's profile invades

your clenched jawline, you borrow his brisk gait,
his snort, his face. People say you look white.
Your father never does. The restaurant won't seat

you, the hostess says neither of you meet the dress
code (your father's wearing a double-breasted suit).
You are a man trying to roll your *rs* again. Where did

the words go? You are still trying to retrieve the sounds
you once dreamt in. You hardly remember your mother
tongue. You are trying to pull something useable from

the wreckage. Yet it all feels familiar. Your best friend
compliments your clean pronunciation, the way you have
learned to let go of everything you once called home.

The Afternoon You Moved Out

In our lopsided driveway
that would lure my basketball towards
the busy street, I was shooting
hoops on a seven-foot rim.
You pulled my limp arms
around your waist and told me
the one thing that would make me
stop crying: *I won't make us move
again.* And then gone. I don't

remember the bag you must have
dragged half-open across the lawn
I had forgotten to cut the afternoon
before, or the way my sister must have
sat, turned her radio up as loud as
possible and then watched from
the second-floor window. None of
those memories stick. They are empty

boxes like the cardboard we would
assemble every year or two and use
to hoard more and more bad drawings
and the clothes our cousins had passed
down. I wonder if my daughter will
remember I read to her every single
day I ever spent with her. Or if she
will only remember the times I was

not there: the field hockey game
I might miss in sixth grade, when
prom coincides with a conference
I have no choice but to attend, or
that moment she calls from college
and needs me. I remember the rare
days better than all the others,
cannot recall what you said

before the car door closed, only
the house still haunted
by the endless rolls of half-used
packing tape, the same tape I used
to take lint off the dress shirt Mommy
had picked for class pictures.

About the Author

Carlos Andrés Gómez is a Colombian American poet from New York City. He is the author of *Hijito* (Platypus Press, 2019), selected by Eduardo C. Corral as the winner of the 2018 Broken River Prize, and the memoir *Man Up: Reimagining Modern Manhood* (Penguin Random House, 2012). Winner of the *Atlanta Review* International Poetry Prize, Lucille Clifton Poetry Prize, and the Sandy Crimmins National Prize for Poetry, Gómez's writing has appeared, or is forthcoming, in the *New England Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *The Yale Review*, *BuzzFeed Reader*, *CHORUS: A Literary Mixtape* (Simon & Schuster, 2012), and elsewhere. Carlos is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College.

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