



***Fractures*, Carlos Andrés Gómez* [University of Wisconsin Press, 2020]**

By Courtney Bambrick

In this rigorously introspective collection, poet Carlos Andrés Gómez looks at masculinity, family, language, and responsibility from the perspective of someone who recognizes the dangers of leaving corrosive attitudes unexamined. The poems in *Fractures* balance reflection and motivation and highlight the difference between loss and release; they reach backward into the past in order to prepare for the challenges of the future.

The collection's focus on an evolving notion of masculinity is unsurprising as Carlos Andrés Gómez published a collection of essays and observations entitled *Man Up*. Early in the collection, "Poem about Death Ending with Reincarnation" establishes the theme of fatherhood that is central to *Fractures*. The poet and his father face a loss by way of a "ritual" of "distraction": eating steaks in near-silence. When thinking of the day of the funeral, the poet reflects, "& as usual, I won't / be able to get the dimple right / in my tie" (8). Many poems throughout the collection circle an uneasiness in this central relationship between father and son, both as an archetype and in the specific intimacy between these men. Repeated images of mirrors and glass suggest reflection—and it is hard to ignore the ways a child reflects a parent in both positive and negative ways. In "Elegy for the Longest Year," Gómez asks:

Papi, how do I become
half the man you are & not the man you were?" (29)

In the poem "Praise," he writes "...I have wanted / to be a father as long / as I have feared its weight" (72). The enormous responsibility of fatherhood, and the dangers inherent in such power, are mitigated by the enormity of the poet's love and the opportunity to do better.

The most affecting poems are those that deal with becoming a parent. These poems step between love and fear deftly and consistently. In poems like "Black Hair," Gómez returns to the idea of reflection. Here, he braids his wife's hair with "the newly / assembled crib watching" (13), practicing so that he is prepared to fix his daughter's hair. He inevitably compares his fatherhood to that of his own father: "Papi's hands / never knew how to fix / my sister's hair" (12), seeking to learn from his past as he makes decisions about his future. In poems such as "Native Tongue," the role of the father is linked to a loss of language and expression by way of a language tutor who shares his father's name. The reclamation of language here seems to echo the navigation back from alienation between people:

Sometimes I search for the exact day
I stopped dreaming in the language

that sings my name. (17)

A few pages later, in “Changing My Name,” again Gómez connects the lineage and inheritance of familial traits to the lineage and inheritance of language. He imagines a son “who’d look even whiter than me” who would “never get asked where he’s from” (21). The father-and-son’s “mouths / robotic” in this poem recalling the previous pair’s “manically / clenching jaws” (7) of an earlier poem. The voice and its inheritance are even more clearly examined in “C(h)ord” wherein the poet struggles with an medical inability to speak and associates that experience with his father’s inability to communicate in English “[m]inus / two words: *Thank you*—the only in English he knew” (34).

Ultimately, Carlos Andrés Gómez speaks into being a world for his family that pushes against the limitations of fear. This new world must allow space to breathe and to speak openly. In several of the poems, he expresses wishes and hopes for his children. In “At the Playground, on the Bus, Everywhere,” he projects (predicts?) agency and autonomy for a baby daughter:

Twenty years from now I hope

she knows her whole body is hers. (36)

Again, the future requires a reconciliation or reckoning with the past. So many poems pick up these braided themes of voice, family, and fatherhood that when we reach the poem titled “Father,” we are prepared to focus explicitly on the tension between fear and love. The poem is punctuated by space, lending it an appropriate breathlessness. The poem fights between the absence of faith and the need for it before ultimately pushing the reader’s attention to the voice of a wailing newborn, “dwarfing any thought” beyond the immediate. As a father, the poet gives up the debate in order to recognize the cry of his child. On the page, the poem’s last stanza shifts into a new space upon the hearing of this new, “tiny growl... that blossomed / into a wail” (69).

The stereotypes, slurs, and humiliation of his own evolution are held up as artifacts of a recent and still reverberating past. In “Cool” (19), “Hand-Stitch” (37), and “Edge of the Dancefloor” (39), Gómez works through latent homophobia and offers a masculinity that moves away from cruelty. The poems reach toward better but acknowledge the discursive process of examining implicit or semi-conscious bias. The collection seeks ways to fully inhabit the increasingly inclusive society he is creating for his children and all people who need care, protection, and support. One of the themes of the collection has to do with letting children and adolescents have their youth in spite of the often socially-demanded toughness they wear. In poems for or inspired by Michael Brown, “Hijito” and “*Race was not a factor*,” Gómez looks at Brown through the lenses [“This sly mirror. This taut mirage” (3)] of himself, his son, his nephew. In the collection’s final poem, “Morning, Riker’s Island,” the mirrors that bounce light

and reflections through the collection are replaced by a window that allows new light into a gymnasium full of adolescent boys who are ultimately “free[d] to sing” in the light of the sun.

Fractures embarks on what seems like a big project, and it is. This collection seeks to identify the fractures in ourselves and our world, and to repair them, creating a world that is less violent, less dangerous, less damaging for future generations. These poems benefit from Carlos Andrés Gómez’s long career as a performer. Though they work on the page, they gain more power read aloud. Voiced, several poems in the collection achieve a solemnity and purpose akin to prayer. As he writes in “Last Sundays at Bootleggers,” Gómez seeks to “remix any wreckage” (26) and create something new and better. The fragments and shards of broken mirrors can cut if left unrepaired—but pieced together into new shapes, they can reflect the world the poet hopes to offer to the future.

***Carlos Andrés Gómez won Philadelphia Stories’ 2018 Sandy Crimmins Prize judged by Nzadi Keita for his poem, “Elegy for Breath.”**