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"Roses are Rosas": Juan Gómez-Quiñones — A Chicano Poet

Juan Gómez-Quiñones is a noted young Chicano historian who was born in Parral, Chihuahua (México), but lived most of his early years in Los Angeles, California. He has a doctorate in history from the University of California at Los Angeles and is presently employed there as associate professor of history. His area of specialty is Chicano labor history, to which field he has contributed impressive and articulate scholarship. As evidenced by the appearance of his *5th and Grande Vista* (*Poems, 1960-1973*), Juan Gómez is also a poet. One notes quickly the diversity of his style, his ability to render equally well scenes of community life as well as private glimpses of those people who are personally close to him. As a poet, Juan Gómez writes with respect and love, demonstrating that he is a tender, perspicacious man, with a keen vision of his people. Whether he is writing in English or in Spanish, or a combination of the two, he is declarative in his poems, sure of his stance, confident of his portrayals. "Roses *are* Rosas" when this poet says they are. The key to Gómez' poetry lies in the fact that throughout the entire volume of poems, as he writes from his experiences, embracing both individuals and the Chicano people as a whole, there is a constant awareness of what it means to be a Chicano in American society. The social realities which Gómez explores, however, are always contrasted to the beauty and dignity of the people themselves. The significance of *5th and Grande Vista*, then, is that we are introduced to a fine poet of definite romantic sensibility, and — what is more beautiful — Juan Gómez-Quiñones is a Chicano poet.

With the title of Gómez' volume and the prologue, we see that he is establishing his roots, recognizing the part that his home and family had in the development of his individuality. *5th and Grande Vista* is the actual street in Los Angeles where Juan Gómez lived and grew up, a fitting title to frame the collection of poems. The Prologue is entitled "Canto al trabajador," dedicated to Juan Gómez Duarte, Gómez' father. Section I of the canto, in Spanish, is a general dedication to all trabajadores, carpenters, electricians, farmworkers, who, in their own way, have been struggling all their lives. "Doy la mano al que lucha"[1] the poet says, because he knows that for these men, "todos los meses son crueles para ellos de las manos esculpidas." The reference to all the months being cruel calls to mind the opening line of T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, "April is the cruelest month," but of course, in Eliot's context, April, the life-giving month, serves to cruelly irritate the sense of the bored, stupored synthetic rich, who wonder what to do with themselves. The poet's workers, in contrast, labor all the months of the year; theirs is not the luxury to wonder what to do. The catalogue of workers in the different occupations is reminiscent of another poet, Walt Whitman, in the poem "I Hear America Singing"; the listing, like a chant, demonstrates the diversity within the oneness of the trabajadores. Gómez goes on to recall the feet of Cuauhtémoc, "last sovereign and first rebel/martyr of the conquest/first taste of bitterness and roses" (translated), and to associate those feet with the feet of the people, who are now marching to help the workers.

Section II of the Prologue, as it switches into English, directs itself more specifically to the poet's father, whose "holy hand" is etched in grime, and "cries and sweat." The poet's apprenticeship was with his father, from whom he learned "who is we and who are they/of right and wrong/who has built the cities/and wherefrom came the riches." The poet remembers the humiliations, the suffering, the prejudices that his father and other fathers have faced, and because "we learn from bitterness and broken bodies,/My father's hand is etched in time/Canto a los trabajadores." A kinship exists between Juan Gómez' portrayal of his father and the portraits of other memorable fathers in Chicano literature. In "Mi Papá — Fourth Canto," Jorge Alvarez honors his father with the "funny tin hat and the poet's hands"; Rudolfo Anaya's father figure in *Bless Me, Ultima*, Gabriel Márez, is a highway workman who must build a road that others will use to go to the land of his dreams; the father in Rudy Espinosa's allegories has "strong crooked fingers that worked and chiseled dreams and hopes and love from rocks of the pyramids lost and gone." With this prologue, Juan Gómez accepts and embraces his past, with pride in a descendency that reaches back to Cuauhtémoc. What is more, he joins in celebrating the strength and courage of those fathers with dreams, talent, and aspirations who were forced to submit to the arduous practicalities of life.

The body of *5th and Grande Vista* is divided into four sections: "The Ballad of Billy Rivera," "Series R," "War," and "Nonsense and Exercise." The sections are dated and appear in reverse chronological order; that is, the first section is the one most recently written, or the one that represents the most recent period of the poet's life. Section I, "The Ballad of Billy Rivera" 1970-1973, as it is listed in the contents, calls to mind the corrido tradition in Mexican culture, the ballads of Gregorio Cortez, Jacinto Treviño, and others who bravely confronted dangers to defend their rights; the corridos tell the story of superhuman men who refused to submit to oppressive forces. Here, however, we have, not a Guillermo Rivera of the early twentieth century, but Billy Rivera, who dies on January 31, 1958, from an overdose of drugs perhaps, but also probably from oppression. Billy Rivera's ballad is a recapitulation of Chicano history before his time and after his time, yet always of his time. Billy Rivera, a Chicano youth growing

up in the fifties, is a singular individual, but in his singularity he represents all Chicanos. The effect is much like what Raúl Salinas is able to do in "A Trip Through the Mind Jail," where in talking about Austin, he celebrates all Chicano cities everywhere.

The entire poem is written in a kind of stream-of-consciousness; the poet juxtaposes emanations from his subconscious with eruptions from the "real" world. It is here that Gómez deftly manages his English and Spanish to his advantage so that form indeed is the outpouring framework for his thought. In the ballad, when Gómez relates literal events that can be placed in the real world, he uses English that is often colloquial or a language of the streets. Reality is often harsh, many times bleak; English affords the poet with the necessary objectivity to delineate what he wants us to think of as real happenings and conversations. For documenting his subjective thoughts, his personal and mythic world, Gómez uses Spanish, which in this poem carries with it a lyrical, more formal, other world quality. As the poem begins, Gómez speaks of the spirit of the people being reborn, speaking and taking form, and flowering. Interposed between the idea of the re-evolution of the spirit and a portrayal of the ancient gods mourning for their lost people, both images described in Spanish, is the actuality described in English, of the dispossessed and despised campesinos striking in the Delano fields in 1965. The use of English and Spanish here serve to highlight the outer and inner voice of the poet speaking for his people. In Spanish, in heightened imagery, Gómez, speaking of the beginning of the movement, says,

de allí
De donde está la
        Bodega de Tormentas
De donde se almacenan
        los vientos.
de allí se regresó.
Se empezó la caminata
        por garzas y carrizales
Entre ríos, plata y sembrados
Por las parras del
        Florido y Nazas
de allí se empezó.

In English, he says, "There is only one relevant demand/freedom. Once you get over fear/the road is open."

As the ballad moves into vignettes of the movement, recalling the demonstrations, the confrontations with police, Gómez fuses contemporary scenes with incidents from revolutionary Mexican history, all the while interlacing his verse with lines from specific Mexican songs. The poet says,

I just want to feel high again
Qué lejos estoy del pueblo donde nací
México lindo y querido
por qué no morir
Por una mujer casada
        loco y apasionado
ando en el movimiento
has dejado solo amargos sentimientos
me incorporé a las filas por
        una mujer bonita
Soy soldado de levita, de esos
        de las filas del movimiento

The use of songs in such a manner as this is not particular to Gómez. Octavio Romano, for one, uses the same device in "Mosaico Mexicano." Both men, however, sense that the music of the people is very much a part of the spirit of the people, and because they are well-known songs, are of a particular time and for all time. Incorporated with this is the idea that song fortifies the heart, as Alurista says in the poem "Let yourself be sidetracked by your guiro" — in the lines, "Make your canto raza, . . . Make la raza live."

With the building of spiritual strength, and as hope triumphs over experience, the poet pronounces that the hour has come, the forgotten gods have returned; "En verdad se puede ser libre y bello." In a lyrical description of the mountains and plains that are inhabited by his people, Gómez implies that the land has been fertilized by their blood and sweat. Thereafter follows the abrupt "Por Vida" whereby the poet indicates his recognition that the people, amongst whom he includes himself, hammer nails of bitterness on walls, nails which leave blisters of hope. "For what future?" he asks himself, and then again, "For what past?" The past, after all, has held much suffering. Even with the demonstrations, for so much violence, the returns are few. "En Coachella two growers signed contracts."

In a more informal, tender tone, Gómez' vision transfers itself to the barrio itself. He says,

Have you ever walked the streets of
East L.A
have you ever seen them shine.
Early in the morning the air smells
of menudo and familia, early
in the morning, on Saturdays
and Sundays.

It is here, then, that he contrasts the paper mache roses that are used to decorate wedding cars to the fields and flowers of Aztlán. Aztlán, he continues, "ha de ser tierra de rosas/tierra de un pueblo de rosas." And,

Sabes.
Have you seen the streets of East L.A
Been in Denver cold in Winter
En Tejas es donde calienta el sol.
Roses are Rosas.

The paper mache roses are not only a recollection of a time past, but a recalling of that time as a reminder of a heritage. Roses literally are rosas on a mythic, personal level.

To conclude his ballad, Gómez returns to the actual world of "easy afternoons sipping beer . . . pepsi-cola cops and paper-mache dances, . . . tired mornings that lead to tired evenings" and the announcement that Billy Rivera dies of an overdose, and his funeral will be on Saturday, February 3, 1958. In much the same way that Octavio Romano suggests his sympathy for Doña Marina in titling his story "A Rosary for Doña Marina," Gómez demonstrates his own sympathy and understanding for Billy Rivera and others like him who chose to end tragically the weight of their oppression.

The second section of *5th and Grande Vista* is called simply "Series R 1968-1969," and consists of a group of fourteen love poems. All the poems, but one, are written in Spanish, perhaps because his style, to match his subject, must be more formal, more subdued. This very personal view from the poet shows us a woman characterized in images of softness and silent sensuality. "Eres el nombre/Eres la hora/Eres el rostro," he tells her. She is a sad woman, his verses say. Her eyes are always on the point of tears.

Triste siempre fuiste
y el mundo mismo se ahogaba en tu
mirada.
Qué no daría por apartar
esa tristeza de tu rostro

He reproaches her tenderly in another poem: "Como buzo me he sumergido/en la tristeza de tus ojos/ Subo borracho con manos vacías." And again, in still another verse, he calls her "triste infiel," and asks, "Por qué en tu ansiedad todo lo has arrastrado?" He knows that when he met her, his soul sang, and he tells her, "Por donde me encuentro/y con quien ande/estarás en el respiro," but he also admits, "Triste eras cuando te conocí."

Many of the poems in this section are in the past tense, which helps to create a sense of things gone. In contrast to the woman's sadness, the poet remembers that sometimes she smiled and spoke sweetly, when they lived in dreams. He wishes that his life were a necklace that she could wear; she was the sun and solitary flower for him, but seeing that she grows apart from him, he wistfully notes, "Te escapas como suspiro/te apartas como el sol cayendo/en la tarde." He feels somehow cheated, as he tells her, in one poem, "Como loco en su locura, creía en tí." She is gone, but the very thought of her is enough to make him love her again, as he says:

Al pasar dejas
el perfume de tu sonrisa
Y te vuelvo a amar.
Otra vez te amo,
cuando con paso de gato
cruza la sombra de tu presencia.
Ausente, Siempre.

In what is one of the most beautiful poems of the entire volume, Gómez captures his feelings for the woman when she does come to him. He associates her with perfumes, music, lightness and joy; the portrayal is one of exhilaration.

Que diferencia cuando estás,
cual momento
Cuando de repente llegas,
Todo se alumbra.

Y sea cual hora, el dia comienza
Ah, sutil vestidora de alegrías, brisa
de perfumes
Presencia de sonrisas, quédate.
Tu voz campanilla de comunión,
es música de baile.

Suave hada que tocas almas
Todo lo vuelves bueno.
Que no pase del encierro de mí,
tu fiesta
Ah, tú que fuiste fiesta de mi vida

Has dejado suave
perfume de azucena.
Y sol alumbrado.

As the highlight of this section, the euphoria of "Qué diferencia cuando estás" is juxtaposed with "Last Poem, the Green Cafe," in which the woman laughingly tells the poet, "We did such silly things."

Section III, entitled "War 1966-1973," covers several themes. To begin with, Gómez dedicates the first five poems to very specific persons and two to the "familia L. A." He writes "octubre 1967" for Che Guevara. In a short poem to the Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda, Gómez declares, "Nuestra venganza será" — and when it comes, the revenge will be angry fire and water and it will cleanse. Gómez, in the following poem, pays tribute to the art and inspiration of Jesús Martí, the Spanish painter; and in another verse, he names León Felipe, the Spanish poet, "Maestro," in a gesture of gratitude from a younger poet to his teacher, an artist who gave him guidance and illumination one rainy afternoon right before his death. To Alurista, Gómez writes a lighter poem, but an important one in which he declares to his friend that he now has things under control. The following two poems, "Those" and "Coming Home," dedicated to the "familia L. A." serve as a call to arms; the poet supplicates his people to understand that the ideals of the movimiento are not outrageous or improbable. In "Those," Gómez states,

These that don't believe
that what is desirable is possible
and with our help even inevitable,
fear the better part of themselves.

The message is reminiscent of Alurista's line "Face your fears, carnal, or die a thousand times hiding." Gómez emphasizes that even apparently needless sacrifices "prove the ideal is real enough for one man,/ And if so for one,/it can be for many." In "Coming Home" there is the further suggestion that before a person can commit himself to the cause, to the movement, he must possess himself so that he may then leave himself behind.

There are several love poems in Section III; the images in these poems are quick. Some of the poems are in English, some in Spanish. In "To D" Gómez evokes a woman for whom even the ocean is tamed, which leads him to say to her, "I knew then/its color could never be/as many hued as your eyes/nor/its roar be/as ominous as your smile." He swiftly unveils her power in deft understatement. Also effective is the soft irony of "If I did not know," in which the poet on the one hand tells the woman that he knows her so well he does not need to "strike her image/upon a coin./Or leave faint tracks of her figure/fleeing across dusty walls," yet he does just that in the poem itself. In "tú," he recalls her, high, nervous, and arched — and himself, anticipatory, flustered, as a disbanded arrow. "The Windman paces" is a wry afterthought describing the stillness "on love sad days" that seems as if the whole world is in sympathy with the lover.

Section III contains within it, besides the dedicatory and the love poems, two barrio poems, "Barrio Sunday" and "From Austin to Houston." Reminiscing, Gómez evokes a "barrio sunday" unlike the sundays of "menudo and familia." The presence of threat, of fear and apprehension mark this rendition of a day in the barrio. The repetition of the "No violence then" serves to frame the scenes of oppressive confinement and increasing hostility. "Afternoon led to afternoon" and brought no promise with it, only monotony of life in the ghetto, and "frontiers were marked." Any intrusion beyond the boundaries was considered trespassing. Mexicans should stay in their own part of town. When young Chicano children wandered on stolen sundays "to another world," outside of their prescribed territory, they were met with

"smiles flickering like blades." It seemed as if the streets would swallow them up, the streets that glistened like glass, mirage-like, deceitfully offering and then withdrawing their welcome. "In the arrogance of innocence, [the poet says,] each child felled the other," by name-calling or whatever child-like act of enmity could be conceived. The children may not have been Chicanos and Anglos, either; all the children could have been Chicanos. When impending threat is constant, people are suspicious of everyone. When Gómez says, "Not child's fortune I,/I survived one afternoon to see my/prison in the morning glare," one feels that he lives through these things growing up in east L. A., but was unconscious of the fact that life should not have had to be like that. He survived those years and gained enough vision to perceive the prison of the barrio in all the naked honest clarity of a "morning glare." And again, he is the poet, but also a Chicano Everyman when he says, "That is why there is violence now."

The next poem, "from Austin to Houston," carries over more sharply the bitterness Gómez feels, not about the people, but about what the people have had to endure. His own sympathy is always with the familia, the children, the men and women of the barrio, even while he detests the things they must do to live. In this poem, we are told of the "bright pain of a Texas sunset" and the "humid weight," like "moss on trees." The oppressive atmosphere and the listlessness caused by the heat are "tedious after one hundred and/thirty-seven years." While the poems are not dated specifically, that many years back would place Texas approximately in the year 1836, the date of Texas' declaration of independence from México, the date from which those of Mexican ancestry living in what was to become the Southwest U. S began to lose the dignity and self-respect to which they had a right "Each day like a stone," the monotony of existence without pride drones on. Even the houses are lonely, decrepitly pathetic, spattered within barrios where "littered alleys" are not uncommon.

When Gómez goes on to address Austin with the comment "you must have savored/pride, then," he could just as easily be addressing Austin the man as Austin the city. It is with this line, in fact, that the full meaning of the poem's title becomes clear. Austin to Houston is one of the most frequently traveled routes for Chicanos in Texas, as popular as the route from Austin to San Antonio, Houston to Corpus. " 'From Austin to Houston,' " however, could also refer to Stephen F. Austin, the Texas settler and Sam Houston, the Texas general who was largely responsible for the victory over the Mexicans at the Battle of San Jacinto. Since that victory, Gómez comments to Austin, with no little sarcasm, "The unseeming Mexican has worn you thin and reedy." Unfortunately, the Mexicans are worn, also; theirs is the higher cost. There is "mocking laughter" in the *cantinas* and in the brothels, and the laughter is as oppressive as the humidity. Young Mexican American girls, "women-girls," continue the tradition of their mothers, prostitution "learned . . . through admonishment" years before and never unlearned by many. The men are at once bursting with frustrations, yet feeling empty as "hollow castings"; they are bodies with the spirit knocked out of them. They live life stealthily, with a nervous glance over their shoulders. "Life is a smoker"; these men gather together to smoke, to drink, to listen to songs in the cantinas. "The best take an advance degree in divinity." The best could be the hard-working good religious family man who relies on his faith in God to see him through; it could also mean that the best of the cantina crowd think of themselves as gods, with a sort of perverse machismo. They cannot deal with larger problems, so they abuse weaker individuals or sometimes create their own entourage of admirers who pathetically live in the limelight of the "macho."

"Texas is a land of lonely houses," Gómez reiterates, and the people, his people, are "huddled along roads." The last two stanzas of the poem set an ominous note of warning. The poet says he loves to see "the secret/white houses of Austin" which are like "snail shells"; these are the homes of Anglos, white houses, secretive and sheltered or barricaded by their shells of privacy and their policy of non-integration. The snail shells contrast with the river stones, the people, who exist with the elements; the stones are hard and cannot be broken; they have been worn smooth with time and experience. Stones can crack snail shells. "Sobre tierra rica/Colorada cae la lluvia violenta" is Gómez' final statement.

The fourth and final section of poems, entitled "Nonsense and exercise 1960-1965," seems more whimsical in nature than the other sections. There is a brief mention of T. S. Eliot, E. Pound, and Sartre, waxing "on the nonsense of things." Gómez presents two particular scenes of México in "Guadalajara, 1962" and "Mexico City, 1966." The latter poem evidently documents a period in which he was engaged in academic research, because he makes the wry comment, "I/read age dignified/papers, seek withered/intents./I ride long weary notes/on galloping foolscap/to my other self." Two interesting selections in this last group are the poems entitled "If hope were half my years" and "Say no"; they are both in the tradition of seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry. In "If hope were half my years," the poet refers to himself as a "priest without vestments" who "blasphemes" by making his lover his religion. His thoughts he calls "pilgrims of an ancient faith" of love; hers is a "pagan sky"; she is the object of his hymns. "Say no" similarly treats the religion of secular love: Heretics both, the poet entreats

his beloved to join with him in making a new faith. "Let us, . . . [he says,] strike our church/And at once/declare ourselves Pope, creed and sacrament." On her answer depends the very fate of his soul. The final poem in the section, and also the last poem of the volume is a light piece entitled simply "Song." It is important, however, in that it registers a state of mind, including the poet's relationship to Los Angeles, and Gómez did choose to end his volume with it. The poem says,

Staying high
riding light
me myself and I

Riding high
staying low
East LA bound

Staying just enough
east LA and I
just Mexican enough

Perhaps the best compliment I can pay to Juan Gómez-Quiñones is to say of him that I believe he fulfilled the wish he articulated in the poem "A Jesús Martí, pintor español," when he said

que mi verso fuera
fuerte como martillo
sencillo como el primer canto
bello como la linea recta
lleno como el tiempo
amoroso como el recuerdo
llegará a tu arte, Martí

He is a versatile poet, in Spanish and English: and whether his focus is on an individual or la gente del barrio, he writes with perception, concern and love. His awareness of life cannot be contained in a category; he is a poet, but a poet who has the consciousness of what it means to be a Chicano growing up in America. And for this there are many who thank him.

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NOTAS

[1]All citations of Gómez' poetry are from Juan Gómez-Quiñones' *5th and Grande Vista (Poems, 1960-1973)* (New York: Editorial Mensaje, 1974).