A Tip of the Chin

by Manuel Muñoz

Editor's Note: *In a time when issues of immigration and cultural assimilation are being discussed everywhere, it's easy to forget that these recent arrivals to America are not faceless hordes, but individuals, each one struggling to make his or her way in a less than welcoming environment. Fortunately we have writers such as Manuel Muñoz to take readers into their world and into their hearts.*

Manuel Muñoz, author of The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue

There's a moment in one of my stories when a young boy, not yet knowing what is acceptable behavior in his neighborhood, waves and calls out hello to a group of older boys playing baseball. What he was supposed to do—what the neighborhood dictated a young boy should do—was tip his chin forward and up. A greeting without words—just a quick tip of the chin—but an acknowledgment just the same.

That single word *hello* ends up setting this boy apart from the rest. That's the consequence of language in a place like California's Central Valley, where I grew up in a small town. Everything hinged on particular boundaries: you were either rich or poor, white or of Mexican descent, and these were boundaries that you did not cross. There were ways of behaving, things you could and could not do, could and could not say.

My hometown of Dinuba has roughly 15,000 people, many of them part of extended families, cousins upon cousins upon cousins. News and gossip traveled quickly, people constantly peering out from behind curtains. Your whole identity was formed, like it or not, by a sort of public consensus. People knew what your parents did for a living (if they were working) or if you were living off state aid. People knew whose house was in danger of being lost to the bank, whose kid was on drugs, whose kid was *dealing* drugs, who had cancer, who was having an affair, who was solving their marital problems out on the front lawn, who was getting favors from somebody on the city board, who had been kicked out of the church, which girl would be forever branded the town slut. Your reputation followed you around before you even had a chance to discover yourself. In my high school, the Chicano kids in the advanced classes were ridiculed for "acting white." In my town, your name was anglicized—or shortened if it was too difficult to say—and you really had no choice.

THE FAITH HEALER OF OLIVE AVENUE
by Manuel Muñoz
ISBN: 1-56512-532-0
Trade Paper Original
Publication: May 2007

In a little town like that, it was difficult to speak up, difficult to learn that you had a right to do so. It took leaving Dinuba for me to realize that it limited the ways I could think, the things I could say, the life I could lead. These stories are, in their own way, going beyond the tip of the chin, going beyond what's expected.

"Everything hinged on particular boundaries: you were either rich or poor, white or of Mexican descent, and these were boundaries that you did not cross."
—Manuel Muñoz

Part of being a writer is embracing a liberation of the self, particularly if the subject is home. You get to take what you know very well and lie about it in order to give fiction its nuance. But you also get the chance to delve deep into silent hearts, and it's the men that I grew up with whom I find simultaneously frustrating and heartbreaking in how strongly they hold up their masks.

The men in my stories have proven difficult to get to know as characters. In many ways, I had to make their appearances in these stories as fully formed as possible, because I knew they would brush up against society's larger, cruder perceptions of what they should be as Latino men: a macho crew of relentless bad boys, ruthless street toughs, silky lotharios, hard drinkers, wife beaters, and Spanish-only immigrants. Fathers with a stranglehold on their families, masculinity prized, and life a constant test to prove one's manhood.

One of machismo's lingering harms is that it cornered Latino men into an insidious stereotype. All of that bravado rendered them, in the end, completely silent. There is a particular way that American culture expects to see them represented, and like the ways of my old neighborhood, stepping outside of those boundaries as a writer can prove uncomfortable. It isn't easy to give unexpected dimensions to characters when there has been only one way to see them. But that's the great, humanizing effect of literature. It renders for all of us a different way of seeing. In these stories you'll find these men doing more than just being silent: they open their mouths and reveal shame or shed tears. Some of them resort to violence; some of them find themselves so deeply in love that they'll cling to anyone who will listen. Some of these men leave their families—but so do some of the women. Nothing is as quintessentially American these days, sadly enough, as a broken family.

American literature has always been one of recovery and retelling: the one story told with variation and with truth. For example, boy meets girl, boy gets girl, and so forth. You can add the adjectives (fat boy meets pretty girl). You can change the nouns (boy loses boy). But the *how* of the story—if the story is told well—will always rope you in. I'm an American writer and I've played with some adjectives and I've played with some nouns. What does the fat boy do when he first meets the pretty girl? What does the boy say to the other boy to win him over? What does that man over there across the street think when you tip your chin to him to say good morning? What would he answer if you asked, "How are you?" ■