Mnemonic
By Carlos Andrés Gómez

I thread our address
into everything now,
use the same sing-
song cadence with
hopes our children
will remember.

When our son developed
speech, we rehearsed our last
name, the properly rolled
"r" in his first. But now the kids
are bombastic: my daughter yells
her full government name at
a passing stranger, begins to deliver
our home address before
I interrupt.

A Gazan mother scrawls
blood type in sharpie & an email
address symmetrically on either side
of her five-year-old daughter's
spinal column. Another searches
for someone to ink contact details
across her son's narrowed
shoulders.

Before I stood on stages, needing
to retrieve poems & stories
on command, I relished the pleasure
of remembering: a chorus' apex,
quip from a film, overlooked quirk
my grandmother thought
no one had witnessed.

In sixth grade
I memorized a poem in Spanish
for a recitation contest but came in second
because I flubbed
a single syllable. *One syllable*, I later thought,
a single lousy syllable.

A switched vowel, swallowed
consonant, the syntax jumbled
at just the point where the order holds
together an entire world
of thought.

I love you. I've
loved you.

I loved you.

Worlds. Partitioned
by the slightest interruption of breath, tongue
tucked behind or between teeth.

I don't remember the language I played in
with my sister as a child, though we have it archived
on cassette tapes. The void inside me remains,
unoccupied by sound.

But elsewhere, I've reconstructed
another language I was still recovering while
my grandmother was alive. I replay conversations
where I understood but could not offer words back
that were not stilted & jumbled. I daydream those
conversations again. Abuelita always knew the vital
details, whether or not I had the words.

Most days, with my kids, I feel anguished
by the limits of language. *I love you so much*,
I say, *I've loved you since the moment I found out*
I was going to be your papi.

But will you always love me? my son
asks, as my daughter begins to plot a word
in marker on my right tricep. *Of course. Always.*
No matter what,
I tell him.

Even if I'm underground? But what if
I'm a hippo? Or a dragon-tiger?

Or made out of
chicken nuggets?

Papi, what if I'm dead?

Mi vida,

why would you say that?

No matter how
many times you trace over each letter, the sweat
of survival places a limit on permanence.
The marker betrays its name. And the body
is betrayed. The sound of a drone over-
head becomes white noise. Nobody
flinches anymore. Nobody holds
their breath.

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