



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

# Reader Resources

## *Hustle*

by David Tomas Martinez

NEA Creative Writing Fellow David Tomas Martinez is “one of American poetry’s authentic new voices” (*San Francisco Chronicle*) and “clearly... in possession of a story that needs to be told” (HTML Giant). In *Hustle*, his debut collection, Martinez reflects on his often violent and chaotic Southeast San Diego youth, including his time as a member of a gang. “Raw and real, full of indelible imagery and lethal language” (*My San Antonio*), Martinez’s poems “feel simultaneously intimate and spectacular as the voice strikes registers of vulnerability and bravado” (*Publishers Weekly*). “A necessary addition to Chicano, Latino, and American poetry” (Booklist), “these poems look to the past with resigned brilliance, finding in recollection not just self-knowledge, but a larger truth about the inescapable power of memory and experience to shape us,” writes award-winning poet Kevin Prufer. Author of a second collection titled *Post Traumatic Hood Disorder*, Martinez “breathes fresh air into American poetry,” writes award-winning poet Ilya Kaminsky. In *Hustle*, “you will see right away a tone that is restless, metaphors that thrill you, and music that’s so contagious it just won’t let you be.



### What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

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# About the Book

"Often, the most ordinary fears obscure the most / obvious truths." — from "Motion and Rest" (p. 49) in *Hustle*

David Tomas Martinez's poems in *Hustle* unflinchingly examine the experiences of his youth—his activity in a gang, the complicated dynamics of his family life, his time in a



shipyard and in the navy, and eventually, his discovery of poetry. From the littered freeways, canyons, and backyards of his San Diego childhood to the tree-canopied, uprooted concrete streets of Houston—where he later moves—*Hustle* shows us a young Martinez negotiating life at the brink of manhood, and later looking back. "Part of my goal in writing this book, which was based chiefly on my experiences, was to allow some of the people I grew up with, many who have been silenced by societal and internal forces, to have a voice" he told *32 Poems*.

Martinez wanted *Hustle* to be unconventional and a reflection of his personality. He recruited his long-time tattoo artist, Bryan Romero, to do the book's cover design, and clues us in at the outset that the viewpoint of these poems will be different from, say, the traditional Romantic-era poems he first studied as a poet. When the speaker of the book's prologue poem, "On Palomar Mountain," finds himself in nature, he isn't struck by its beauty or purity, but instead feels a deep sense of disconnection. "I really don't know what an oak looks like," Martinez told *My San Antonio*, "but I can name All Star-worthy point guards. I could tell you who got shot at the corner of Euclid and Martin Luther King in the summer of 1994 by who and why".

From the poems that follow, Martinez's vividly-rendered memories become the springboards for reflections on themes such as power, masculinity, identity, violence, and love. "By focusing on craft and by staying close to the language," he told PEN America, "my words lead me to psychological and emotional truth in ways that just thinking or talking about an experience can't. There is a certain amount of discovery in the process and I find that in staying

close to the language, I'm able to surprise myself".

"Calaveras" (Spanish for "skulls"), the sweeping eleven-part poem that makes up the first section of the book, opens with the speaker attempting to steal a car so he can get hold of a pistol. Chased by police across a freeway, he escapes into a field of cactus and ends up spending his night in a hot bath: "...four hours of needles / shooting from the skin // and holding the faucet like a gun" (p. 7). It is a story that begins with audacity and ends in vulnerability—an arc that echoes throughout the collection. Also reverberating through the book is the question of what it means to be a "man," with speakers of the poems finding themselves in difficult situations and struggling "with the necessity to be strong because of environment or societal and community expectations," Martinez told *Eckleburg*. "I don't know what being a man is. I do know that we live in a patriarchal society that gives men mixed signals to not show weakness but love your family," Martinez said in an interview with *My San Antonio*. "How are you supposed to have feelings if you can't show vulnerability? How are you supposed to love if you don't know how to feel?" In poems like "The Only Mexican" (p. 39), "Innominatus" (p. 41), and "The Mechanics of Men" (p. 90) Martinez explores these dynamics in multiple generations of his own family.

Martinez is also interested, more generally, in how we shape our identities and how our identities shape us. For his own part, he says his "relationship with identity can be listed as 'complicated'" (PEN America). "I'm half Mexican, half white, and I grew up in a predominantly black (it was called Lil Afrika) neighborhood" (*Eckleburg*). In poems like "To the Young," he considers how identity is something we project: "To the young / black male / dressed / like a punk rock / hipster club kid / with teddy bears / tied to his sneakers / you too are split / down the middle" (p. 27).

Violence is an undercurrent in many of the poems in the collection, with Martinez trying to make sense of how he responded to and coped with the violence of his youth. In the haunting "Forgetting Willie James Jones" (p. 65), he looks back on the summer of 1994 when a sequence of murders took place, each in retaliation for the one that came before. "I was still angry that [my friend Maurice's death] had been completely ignored by the San Diego news media, and that Willie [who was valedictorian] was being memorialized... At 17, I didn't possess the language to understand that my resentment was not with Willie but the lack of empathy for

my friend" (*Eckleburg*). "Motion and Rest" is another poem in which Martinez considers violence—both in nature and an urban environment—and how "commensurately tenuous life is" (p. 47).

Published by independent press Sarabande Books in 2014, *Hustle* won the New England Book Festival's prize in poetry, the Devil's Kitchen Reading Award, and received an honorable mention in the Antonio Cisneros Del Moral prize. It took Martinez almost five years to write. "I loved it after just one read-through," said Sarah Gorham, Editor in Chief at Sarabande Books. "Martinez's history is one of violence,

machismo, dangerous sex, father hate, mother love, beat-up cars, drive-by shootings. And yet he has emerged with a poetry keen with emotional intelligence, wild with energy and grief, transcendent even while it rolls in the dust spotted with broken glass" (*Poets and Writers*).

"You know in any good piece of art when [the writer's] truth is poking through," says Martinez. "I know those moments when I write. I think, 'This is true, this hurts...' I indict myself in so many poems. I think that to a certain extent, you have to be unafraid to make a fool of yourself" (NBC Latino).

## About the Author

### David Tomas Martinez (b. 1976)

"I think a poem is a type of permanence, like a tree—a seemingly fixed and static event that is actually moving and changing imperceptibly."

— David Tomas Martinez in *32 Poems*

David Tomas Martinez was born and raised in San Diego, California, not far from the United States-Mexico border.

His mother, who had Martinez at the age of 16, worked at a doctor's office throughout his childhood; his father worked long hours as a landscaper, then later at a grocery store. Martinez was 12 when his parents divorced. He was angry, he says, and at the age of 15 he joined a gang. "If I wasn't going to be part of a home I would be part of the street" (*Poets and Writers*). The gang had a reputation for violence and was tracked closely by the police. "I thought I was going to jail and that was it," he told NBC Latino.

When Martinez was 16, his girlfriend became pregnant, and at 17 his first son was born. He dropped out of school and went to work at a shipyard. He later decided to join the navy, but to do so, he first needed to return to high school to complete his degree. With his diploma in hand, he enlisted. But after a short period in the navy, he realized military life wasn't for him and found a way to get kicked out. He joined a job corps program painting houses, then enrolled in the nearby community college. "The only reason I went was to play basketball," he told the *Houston Chronicle*. "A friend told me he could get me on the team. I still had



Photo by Rachel Eliza Griffiths

dreams...or delusions...of playing for the NBA." He says he showed up to his first day of community college like it was his first day of elementary school. He didn't know he had to register for classes. He didn't have a pencil or a backpack. He ultimately enrolled in a poetry workshop "for no real reason except it fit into my schedule" (NEA Art Works Blog). But Martinez had always liked to read. Even during his time in the gang he would come home at night and read philosophy. "I saw learning, being smart, as a rejection of vulnerability... [I was] drawn to power, be it physical, mental, or whatever..." (*My San Antonio*).

Within a few years, Martinez—at the encouragement of his teachers—had committed himself to studying the craft of poetry. He carried a duct-taped dictionary the size of his chest everywhere he went. He had transferred to San Diego State University, where he would ultimately earn both his BA and MFA degrees, and began collecting items "that would mirror back... [his] inner desire to create something": coffee cups, belt buckles, t-shirts emblazoned with the word "poet" (NEA Art Works Blog). He didn't always feel confident writing about his past. "You have a wealth of history and experience," a professor told him. "Most people that are coming to poetry do not have that" (*Houstonia*).

Martinez finished the manuscript for *Hustle*, his first collection, while pursuing his PhD at the University of Houston. He celebrated the book's publication by getting two tattoos: a tattoo on his leg with the book's cover design, and a tattoo on his wrist with the logo of his publisher, Sarabande Books. These added to his many other tattoos, which already included "Poetic" on one arm and "License" on the other—commemorating his acceptance into the MFA program—and "Hommes de lettres," which he got when he began his PhD. They also included the names of David Anthony, his first son, and Isaiah, whom he had at 21.

"Many of my tattoos mark some transition or accomplishment in my life," he told the blog Tattoosday. They're "a sort of journal that everyone can read."

These days, Martinez lives in Brooklyn, New York with his partner Kelsey and young daughter Xochi. He is an avid cook and loves preparing meals for his family and friends. If he can approximate "that feeling of standing next to a stove and being handed a warm, homemade tortilla that butter drips from as it's put to your mouth," then he's satisfied, he says (PEN America). He has fond childhood memories of driving with his family to Tijuana to try different taco stands. He loves tacos. "If you fried up dirt with manteca I would be disgusted, but if you slapped that mess inside a tortilla, pure gold, Pony Boy" (*Entropy*). Martinez also sees his personal fashion as a craft—just as he does poetry and cooking. "I like to flex in the way I dress," he told PEN America. A lover of designer clothes and an avowed bargain hunter, he can often be found in the Century 21

department store in lower Manhattan. He's there so much, the employees know him by name.

Martinez is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts creative writing fellowship and has received fellowships from CantoMundo—an organization that cultivates Latinx poets and poetry—and the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. He is also the winner of the 2015 Verlaine Poetry Prize. Martinez's second poetry collection, *Post Traumatic Hood Disorder*, was recently published by Sarabande Books, and he says he is overdue for at least two more tattoos: one with his daughter's name, and one marking his second book's publication.

"There have been exciting / discoveries / in the field / of me," he writes in the poem "Scientifically Speaking" (p. 82 of *Hustle*). "Many / of which, / I have / made / myself."

## Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Martinez chose to title his collection *Hustle*? What are different meanings you can think of for the word? How do these different meanings shed light on your reading of the book?
2. Martinez has said that every poem in the collection has autobiographical elements. Does knowing that the poems are about Martinez's own life influence how you read the book? If so, how?
3. The poem "On Palomar Mountain" (p. 1) serves as the book's prologue. Why do you think Martinez chose to place this poem ahead of the others in the collection? What imagery and themes are introduced here that set the stage for what follows in the book?
4. "Memory is a fist to the eye," Martinez writes in the poem "Calaveras" (p. 8). Why do you think the speaker of the poem instructs himself—and the reader—to "Remember all that you see" given this painful description of memory? How might you describe other memories of his throughout the collection? Does his description resonate with any of your own memories?
5. Later in "Calaveras," the speaker says "As a boy I died / into silent manhood" (p. 19). What do you think he means? How would you describe the "manhood" into which the speaker is entering? Can you find examples of this in the book? How would you describe your own experiences transitioning from childhood to adulthood?
6. Describing Chicano Park in San Diego, the speaker states "Not even bags of chips, cheetahs with wind, / avoid being tackled, gouged, and ripped apart" (p. 37). What are some of the other specific details the speaker includes in his description of this landscape? What can we learn about the speaker from what he observes and how he chooses to describe it in this and other poems?
7. Try reading the poem "The Cost of it All" (p. 56) out loud. Does speaking and hearing the words add to your experience or understanding of the poem? If so, in what ways? How about for other poems in the collection? What are some elements of Martinez's writing—for example, rhythm, repetition, word choice—that stand out to you?
8. Looking at poems like "The Only Mexican" (p. 39), "Innominatus" (p. 41) and "The Mechanics of Men" (p. 90), how would you describe the speaker's relationship with his father and grandfather? How do these and other relationships in the book inform his perceptions of masculinity and gender? Did you recognize any of your own family dynamics in Martinez's descriptions?
9. What are some of the comparisons the speaker makes, and dichotomies he explores, in "Motion and Rest" (p. 47)? Why do you think Martinez chose to write this piece as a "prose poem"—using paragraphs—unlike the other poems in the collection? In what ways did the structure of the poem influence your response to it?
10. "Deus ex machina" is a term that Martinez uses in "Motion and Rest" (p. 50). It refers to a plot device in

which a situation is resolved—or individuals are saved—in a sudden or miraculous way. Why do you think Martinez is interested in this idea? Where in the book do situations or fates seem inescapable?

11. In “Forgetting Willie James Jones,” Martinez looks back on the summer of 1994, when “death walked alongside us all” (p. 66) and a series of gang-related shootings took the life of his friend, Maurice, and his acquaintance, Willie. What are some ways in which the poem describes morality, power, and/or the effects of violence? Why do you think Martinez chooses to end the poem with the line “How strong I felt in ‘94, when the most chivalrous // thing I could do was block a door, / stop a rape”? Do you think the notion of “strength” changes between the beginning and the end of the poem?
12. *Hustle*'s cover features tattoo script in black ink against a white background. What were the first impressions you had of the book based on its cover design? Now that you've read the collection, can you think of ways in which the cover image relates metaphorically to the

subject matter of the book? Comparing the cover of *Hustle* to the cover of other books you've read or seen, what are some of the other design choices you notice about *Hustle*?

13. Why do you think Martinez chose to tell his story—and reflect on his past—through poetry? If you've encountered similar themes or subject matter in other forms—for example, in books of fiction or in film—how do those experiences compare to your experience of reading *Hustle*?
14. Were any of the experiences or situations portrayed in *Hustle* familiar to you before you read the book? If so, did you find that the poems gave voice to things you've been thinking about or feeling? If the subject matter was not familiar to you, are there things you see differently now that you've read this book?

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Several questions on this list have been adapted from the Sarabande Books Reader's Guide for *Hustle*.



The National Endowment for the Arts was established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government. To date, the NEA has awarded more than \$5 billion to support artistic excellence, creativity, and innovation for the benefit of individuals and communities. The NEA extends its work through partnerships with state arts agencies, local leaders, other federal agencies, and the philanthropic sector.

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