**When the Change Comes Over You**

José Enrique Medina

When I was five years old, my brother said haughtily, “My name in English is Arthur. That means I’m as cool as Arthur Fonzarelli, The Fonz.”

He stuck his tongue out at me.

I was devastated.

 Nobody was cooler than The Fonz. I wanted to be like him. The Fonz would pound the side of a vending machine and free sodas would drop down, or he’d snap his fingers and a horde of girls in poodle skirts would respond.

This happened in 1974, some years after my parents immigrated to East Los Angeles from Mexico with their five children. Back then, public schools instructed recent Latino immigrants in Spanish only. My siblings and I weren’t allowed to read English textbooks. During the day, we went to school and pretended we lived in a country where the official language was Spanish. At night, we taught ourselves English by watching television. One of the shows we loved was Happy Days, in which The Fonz appeared. Other favorites were Kimba the White Lion and Speed Racer, Japanese cartoons dubbed into English. In this way, little by little, we accumulated a small handful of English words. Our mother had only a second-grade Spanish education, so she couldn’t help us translate the world around us. Our father had abandoned us.

Via the magic of language, my brother Arturo (aka Turo) had transformed himself into Arthur. He raised his nose, basking in the glory of his new persona, and jeered at me, “Ha! Ha! You’re not cool.”

I didn’t know what my name was in English, so I couldn’t defend myself or fight back. I hung my head, absorbing the attack. I was nothing more than a matt on which The Fonz wiped his shiny black boots.

The next day I marched to kindergarten and asked my teacher, “What’s my name in English?” Armed with this verbal salvo, I made a beeline for my brother. I put my hands on my hips and said, “My name in English is Henry. The real name of The Fonz is Henry Winkler. His fake name is Arthur Fonzarelli. That means you are a fake, and I’m the real Fonz.”

 My brother lashed back, “Henry Winkler is boring. The cool one is Arthur Fonzarelli.”

 “Henry is the one who gets paid,” I said, “and having money is cooler.”

Although I argued passionately, I agreed with my brother. Even before he had pointed it out, I thought Henry Winkler, the soft-spoken actor, was much duller than the character he played. He was almost the opposite of The Fonz: quiet and nerdy. I wasn’t, however, going to let Turo know that, so I kept insisting Henry was the cooler of the two. If I repeat it enough, I thought, maybe I can get him to believe what I don’t. In either case, by age five, I had learned that, using words, I could recreate myself in whatever form I wanted. That’s what I did.