**I Am Joaquín (1967)**

by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzáles

Yo soy Joaquín,[[1]](#footnote-1)

perdido en un mundo de confusión:

I am Joaquín,

lost in a world of confusion,

caught up in the whirl of a

gringo society,

confused by the rules, scorned by attitudes,

suppressed[[2]](#footnote-2) by manipulation,

and destroyed by modern society.

My fathers

 have lost the economic battle

and won

 the struggle of cultural survival.

And now!

 I must choose

between

 the paradox[[3]](#footnote-3) of

victory of the spirit,

despite physical hunger,

or

 to exist in the grasp

of American social neurosis,[[4]](#footnote-4)

sterilization of the soul

 and a full stomach.

Yes,

I have come a long way to nowhere,

unwillingly dragged by that

 monstrous, technical,

 industrial giant called

Progress

and Anglo success....

I look at myself.

 I watch my brothers.

 I shed tears of sorrow.

 I sow seeds of hate.

 I withdraw to the safety within the

circle of life—

MY OWN PEOPLE.

I am Cuauhtémoc[[5]](#footnote-5),

proud and noble,

leader of men,

king of an empire

civilized beyond the dreams

 of the gachupín Cortés[[6]](#footnote-6),

who also is the blood,

 the image of myself.

I am the Maya prince.

I am Nezahualcóyotl,

great leader of the Chichimecas. [[7]](#footnote-7)

I am the sword and flame of Cortés

the despot[[8]](#footnote-8)

And

I am the eagle and serpent of

the Aztec civilization.[[9]](#footnote-9)

I owned the land as far as the eye

could see under the crown of Spain,[[10]](#footnote-10)

and I toiled[[11]](#footnote-11) on my earth

and gave my Indian sweat and blood

for the Spanish master

who ruled with tyranny over man and

beast and all that he could trample.

But...

THE GROUND WAS MINE.

I was both tyrant and slave.

As the Christian church took its place

 in God's good name,

to take and use my virgin strength and

trusting faith,

the priests,

both good and bad,

took—

but

 gave a lasting truth that

Spaniard

Indian

Mestizo

were all God's children.

And

 from these words grew men

who prayed and fought

for

 their own worth as human beings,

for

that

GOLDEN MOMENT

 of

 FREEDOM.

I was part in blood and spirit

 of that

courageous village priest

Hidalgo[[12]](#footnote-12)

who in the year eighteen hundred and ten

rang the bell of independence

and gave out that lasting cry—

 el grito de Dolores:

 “Que mueran los gachupines y que viva

la Virgen de Guadalupe…”[[13]](#footnote-13)

I sentenced him

who was me

I excommunicated[[14]](#footnote-14) him, my blood.

I drove him from the pulpit to lead

 a bloody revolution for him and me…

I killed him.

His head,

 which is mine and of all those

 who have come this way,

I placed on that fortress wall

 to wait for independence.

Morelos!

Matamoros!

Guerrero![[15]](#footnote-15)

all compañeros in the act,

STOOD AGAINST THAT WALL OF

INFAMY[[16]](#footnote-16)

 to feel the hot gouge of lead

 which my hands made.

I died with them…

 I lived with them…

 I lived to see our country free.

Free

 from Spanish rule in

 eighteen-hundred-twenty-one[[17]](#footnote-17).

Mexico was free??

The crown was gone

but

all its parasites remained

and ruled

and taught

 with gun and flame and mystic power.

I worked

I sweated

I bled

I prayed

and waited silently for life

to begin again.

I fought and died

for

Don Benito Juárez,[[18]](#footnote-18)

guardian of the Constitution.

I was he

on dusty roads

on barren land

as he protected his archives

 as Moses did his sacraments.[[19]](#footnote-19)

He held his Mexico

in his hand

on

the most desolate

 and remote ground

 which was his country.

And this giant

little Zapotec[[20]](#footnote-20)

gave

 not one palm's breadth

of his country's land to

 kings or monarchs or presidents

of foreign powers.

I am Joaquín.

I rode with Pancho Villa[[21]](#footnote-21),

 crude and warm,

a tornado at full strength,

nourished[[22]](#footnote-22) and inspired

 by the passion and the fire

 of all his earthy people.

I am Emiliano Zapata[[23]](#footnote-23).

“This land,

this earth

 is

OURS.”

The villages

 the mountains

 the streams

 belong to Zapatistas[[24]](#footnote-24).

Our life

 or yours

is the only trade for soft brown earth

and maize.

All of which is our reward,

 a creed that formed a constitution

 for all who dare live free!

“This land is ours…

 Father, I give it back to you.

Mexico must be free…”

I ride with revolutionists

against myself.

I am the Rurales,[[25]](#footnote-25)

coarse and brutal,

I am the mountain Indian,

superior over all.

The thundering hoof beats are my horses.

The chattering machine guns

 are death to all of me:

 Yaqui

 Tarahumara

 Chamala

 Zapotec

 Mestizo

 Español[[26]](#footnote-26)

I have been the bloody revolution,

the victor,

the vanquished.[[27]](#footnote-27)

I have killed

 and been killed.

I am the despots Díaz

and Huerta[[28]](#footnote-28)

and the apostle of democracy,

Francisco Madero.[[29]](#footnote-29)

I am

the black-shawled

faithful women

who die with me

or live

depending on the time and place.

I am

 faithful

 humble

 Juan Diego,[[30]](#footnote-30)

the Virgin of Guadalupe,

Tonantzin, Aztec goddess, too.

I rode the mountains of San Joaquín[[31]](#footnote-31).

I rode east and north

as far as the Rocky Mountains,

and

all men feared the guns of

Joaquín Murrieta.[[32]](#footnote-32)

I killed those men who dared

 to steal my mine,

 who raped and killed

my love

my wife.

Then

I killed to stay alive.

I was Elfego Baca,[[33]](#footnote-33)

 living my nine lives fully.

I was the Espinoza brothers

 of the Valle de San Luis.[[34]](#footnote-34)

All

were added to the number of heads

that

 in the name of civilization

were placed on the wall of independence,

heads of brave men

who died for cause or principle,

good or bad.

Hidalgo! Zapata!

 Murrieta! Espinozas!

are but a few.

They

dared to face

the force of tyranny

of men

who rule

by deception and hypocrisy.

I stand here looking back,

and now I see

 the present,

and still

 I am a campesino,[[35]](#footnote-35)

 I am the fat political coyote[[36]](#footnote-36)—

I,

of the same name,

Joaquín,

in a country that has wiped out

all my history,

stifled all my pride,

in a country that has placed a

different weight of indignity upon

my

 age-

 old

 burdened back.

Inferiority

is the new load…

 The Indian has endured and still

emerged the winner,

 the Mestizo must yet overcome,

 and the gachupín will just ignore.

 I look at myself

 and see part of me

who rejects my father and my mother

and dissolves into the melting pot[[37]](#footnote-37)

 to disappear in shame.

 I sometimes

 sell my brother out

 and reclaim him

for my own when society gives me

 token leadership

in society's own name.

I am Joaquín,

who bleeds in many ways.

the altars of Moctezuma[[38]](#footnote-38)

I stained a bloody red.

My back of Indian slavery

 was stripped crimson

from the whips of masters

who would lose their blood so pure

when revolution made them pay,

standing against the walls of

 retribution.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Blood

 has flowed from

 me

on every battlefield

between

campesino, hacendado,[[40]](#footnote-40)

slave and master

and

revolution.

I jumped from the tower of Chapultepec[[41]](#footnote-41)

into the sea of fame—

my country's flag

 my burial shroud—[[42]](#footnote-42)

with Los Niños,[[43]](#footnote-43)

whose pride and courage

could not surrender

with indignity[[44]](#footnote-44)

 their country's flag

to strangers . . . in their land.

Now

 I bleed in some smelly cell

 from club

 or gun

 or tyranny.

I bleed as the vicious gloves of hunger

 cut my face and eyes,

as I fight my way from stinking barrios

 to the glamour of the ring

 and lights of fame

 or mutilated sorrow.

My blood runs pure on the ice-caked

hills of the Alaskan isles,

on the corpse-strewn beach of Normandy,

the foreign land of Korea

and now

 Vietnam.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Here I stand

Before the court of justice,

guilty

for all the glory of my Raza[[46]](#footnote-46)

to be sentenced to despair.

Here I stand,

poor in money,

arrogant with pride,

bold with machismo,

rich in courage

 and

wealthy in spirit and faith.

My knees are caked with mud.

My hands calloused from the hoe.

I have made the Anglo rich,

yet

 equality is but a word—

 the Treaty of Hidalgo[[47]](#footnote-47) has been broken

 and is but another treacherous promise.

My land is lost

 and stolen,

My culture has been raped.

 I lengthen

the line at the welfare door

and fill the jails with crime.

These then

are the rewards

 this society has

for sons of chiefs

 and kings

 and bloody revolutionists,

who

gave a foreign people

all their skills and ingenuity

to pave the way with brains and blood

for

those hordes of gold-starved

strangers,

who

changed our language

and plagiarized our deeds

as feats of valor

of their own.

They frowned upon our way of life

 and took what they could use.

Our art,

our literature,

our music, they ignored—

so they left the real things of value

and grabbed at their own destruction

 by their greed and avarice.

They overlooked that cleansing fountain of

 nature and brotherhood

 which is Joaquín.

The art of our great señores,

Diego Rivera,

Siqueiros,

 Orozco,[[48]](#footnote-48) is but

another act of revolution for

the salvation of mankind.

Mariachi music, the

heart and soul

of the people of the earth,

the life of the child,

and the happiness of love.

The corridos[[49]](#footnote-49) tell the tales

of life and death,

of tradition,

legends old and new,

of joy

 of passion and sorrow

of the people—who I am.

I am in the eyes of woman,

sheltered beneath

her shawl of black,

deep and sorrowful

eyes

that bear the pain of sons long buried

 or dying,

 dead

on the battlefield or on the barbed wire

of social strife.

Her rosary she prays and fingers

endlessly

like the family

working down a row of beets

to turn around

and work

and work.

 There is no end.

Her eyes a mirror of all the warmth

and all the love for me,

and I am her

and she is me.

We face life together in sorrow,

anger, joy, faith and wishful

thoughts.

I shed the tears of anguish

as I see my children disappear

behind the shroud of mediocrity,

never to look back to remember me.

I am Joaquín.

I must fight

 and win this struggle

 for my sons, and they

 must know from me

 who I am.

Part of the blood that runs deep in me

could not be vanquished by the Moors.[[50]](#footnote-50)

I defeated them after five hundred years,

and I endured.

Part of the blood that is mine

has labored endlessly four hundred

years under the heel of lustful

Europeans.

 I am still here!

I have endured in the rugged mountains

 of our country

I have survived the toils and slavery

 of the fields.

I have existed

in the barrios of the city

in the suburbs of bigotry

in the mines of social snobbery

in the prisons of dejection

in the muck of exploitation

and

in the fierce heat of racial hatred.

And now the trumpet sounds,

the music of the people stirs the

revolution.

Like a sleeping giant it slowly

rears its head

to the sound of

 tramping feet

 clamoring voices

 mariachi strains

 fiery tequila explosions

 the smell of chile verde and

soft brown eyes of expectation for a

better life.

And in all the fertile farmlands,

the barren plains,

the mountain villages,

smoke-smeared cities,

we start to MOVE.

 La raza!

Méjicano!

 Español!

 Latino!

 Hispano!

 Chicano!

or whatever I call myself,

 I look the same

 I feel the same

 I cry

 and

 sing the same.

I am the masses of my people and

I refuse to be absorbed.

I am Joaquín.

The odds are great

but my spirit is strong,

my faith unbreakable,

my blood is pure.

I am Aztec prince and Christian Christ.

 I SHALL ENDURE!

 I WILL ENDURE!

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1. The name Joaquín is seen as a bow to Joaquín Murrieta, who began mining for gold in California in 1849 and, according to legend, became an outlaw after his wife was raped and killed when they were driven from his gold claim. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. restrained [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. contradiction [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. stress [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Last Aztec Emperor (1495-1522). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. gachupín: derogatory term for Spaniard; Hernan Cortés was the Spanish conquistador who led the invasion of the Aztec Empire and paved the way for Spanish settlement of Central America. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Nezahualcóyotl was a philosopher, warrior, architect, poet, and ruler of the city-state of Texcoco in pre-Columbian era Mexico; the Chichimecas were a nomadic tribe from northern Mexico. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. dictator [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Legend has it that the original Aztecs settled in Tenochtitlán because they had been searching for a lake with a rock on top of which an eagle was devouring a serpent. The eagle and the serpent are now symbols on the Mexican flag; see *Borderlands/La Frontera*, lines 133-142 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Spanish Empire ruled by the monarchy. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. work extremely hard [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Miguel Hidalgo was a Roman Catholic priest who led the Mexican War of Independence against Spain and is considered the father of Mexico. He marched across Mexico and gathered an army of 90,000 poor farmers and Mexican civilians. When he was captured in 1811, he was executed by firing squad and decapitated; his head was placed on display as a warning against other insurgents. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Death to the Spaniards and life to the Virgin of Guadalupe.* [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. To kick out of the Roman Catholic church [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The names of three other leaders executed along with Hidalgo. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Being known for something bad; here, “that wall of infamy” is a reference to the firing squad. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Year of Mexican independence. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. First mestizo president of Mexico. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. According to the Old Testament, the prophet Moses received the Ten Commandments on tablets from God. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Indigenous Mexican people. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Mexican revolutionary leader. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. provide with food [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Mexican revolutionary leader. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Followers of Zapata. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Commonly used name for the Guardia Rural, a mounted police force (1861-1914). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Different national and ethnic peoples that make up the Mexican nation. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. the victor/the vanquished: the winner, the loser [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Mexican dictators. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Leader of the Mexican Revolution. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Mexican religious icon, probably mythical. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Low mountain range in California. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See note at beginning of poem. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. A folk hero for having singlehandedly fought off a group of Texas cowboys. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. In the San Luis Valley of Colorado in the 1860s, Felipe and Vivian Espinoza, Mexican-born folk heroes, engaged in guerilla warfare against the Anglos. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Poor farmer. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. In this context: corrupt politician [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. The “melting pot” is an antiquated metaphor used to describe America’s immigrant population as a mixture of people from different places “melting” together to form a new American culture. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Second-to-last Aztec emperor (1466-1520). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. revenge [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Landowner. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. A castle/fortress on a hill in Mexico City where the U.S. army began their assult on the city in 1847, in the Mexican American War. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. A ceremonial cloth used to cover a body before burial. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Los Niños Héroes, six military cadets who, at Chapultepec, famously gave their lives rather than surrendering during that battle. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. shameful treatment [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Here Gonzales references Chicano members of the U.S. military stationed in Alaska and invading the coast of Normandy during World War II, and serving in the Korean and Vietnam Wars. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Race; this word generally refers to all Spanish-speaking peoples of the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. The treaty which ended the Mexican American War and gave massive amounts of land to the United States including the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Texas, Wyoming, and Colorado. Mexicans living in that territory were originally given the option to stay and become American citizenship, but ultimately many of the former-Mexican landowners were forced off the land. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Mexican painters. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. songs [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. The Moors were an ethnic group in North Africa that controlled Spain for over 500 years beginning in 711 A.D. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)