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# Poemas

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## Poemas

### **Cover Page Footnote**

This article is from an earlier iteration of *Diálogo* which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "*Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal*."

## A LESSON LEARNED IN CHICAGO

You strut in with gang signs in your eyes,  
I arrive with books under my arms.  
You have lived on the streets where  
the cry of your mother has become broken glass,  
your stepfather's belt buckle a scar on the edge of your eye,  
his fist a split bone in your nose.

We sit in a room  
until we find a story we can share,  
a short one for a short time.  
It keeps you from gazing out the window,  
from becoming a cloud.

My hope hangs on the edge of a cliff.  
All day I hope; trying to give you new things to consider.  
You, in turn, have given me the dark dreams,  
of death spilling red under my feet,  
of trouble flashing in the corner of my eye.  
I study your eyes-they become birds  
detached from my words

Across the street young boys  
rise up and explode.  
What is a book to them if they cannot read  
their own stories or utter their own names?

I cannot make you copy the problems  
on the board; you have too many of your own.  
What happened last night-  
the body shot down next to you,  
cops pulling back your neck  
thrusting their stick in your ribs  
until you screamed  
These are the subjects that worry you  
a book will not help now.

I do not know how your story flew away  
and became a small thing under us.  
I want to remember your eyes;  
they have wings.  
I keep your desk by the window  
a pencil and some paper ready for you.

## GANG GIRLS

For a dead girl of fourteen  
her hair could not be more beautiful  
her lips and nostrils seem to quiver  
but her cheeks are flat, her brows too serious  
she used to laugh easily.  
It is a hard place to be-this pine box  
Some hands try to touch her cheeks  
neighbors whisper their sadness to each other.  
Soon a flower will be planted over her heart.  
It happened so fast  
soft mumbling, heads shaking back and forth  
*what a shame, such a shame.*

When you live on a block that knows gangs  
there are no rules  
certain things are impossible or mangled  
few grow up to believe in great things  
death is a fever that laughs at children  
a language of hate rises to swallow them.

Gang girls are slow in thoughts of peace  
landscape of empty names, empty eyes  
sitting on rotten thrones, there is a ghost in each one  
bellies stuffed with revenge their breasts nurse violence  
their tongues grow cold, their hearts grow cold  
they run through flames more dead than alive.

A mother burns then bursts into pieces  
cursing them, waving her fist  
while they jump the fence folding into darkness  
their days travel backward vanishing into the streets,  
into dark houses or the edge of a knife.





## PUERTO RICAN MIGRATION 1950

Years ago there was a way of living,  
a rough manner on an island  
the cane burst through the red mud  
and the sweat on the brow  
of a tired cane-cutting man was all he  
could drink. His son will have better.

There was a boy who swung  
a machete against the cane  
for so long his arms  
grew as thick as a mango tree.  
He raised his machete  
waved it frantically,  
*Estoy aquí. Trabajo con dolor.*  
*Hay tanto dolor que no hay donde esconderlo.*

A plane flew carrying the boy  
with a strong spine, ripe muscles  
hopes like flames burning through fear.  
The boy flew so far away  
his pain became a tiny thing  
inside of him.

In this new country he became  
a follower of his own shadow  
a tongue stuck to the back of a throat  
a reflection stretched gray on hotel dishes  
hollow like his hope  
eyes red from the fire of work  
he lost the memory of why he had come.

The young boy became an old man  
the old scars could not cover the older ones  
he remembered his father carrying  
the cane, a sweet sister, laughing boys  
holding grief his feet stomped the pavement  
raising his eyes he cried frantically,  
*Estoy aquí. Trabajo con dolor.*  
*Hay tanto dolor que no hay donde esconderlo.*

He did not want to forget how it was  
hope became a tiny thing inside him.

Photo by Marisa Alicea.

Yolanda Nieves, a native of Humboldt Park in Chicago, teaches reading to inner city students at Wright College. As a Puerto Rican poet, she writes about the Latina women's experience and perspectives related to Latino youth growing up in a culture of marginalization. She has been published in various anthologies and journals including, the University of Arizona's *Bilingual Review*, and *Coloring Book, an Eclectic Anthology of Fiction & Poetry by Multicultural Writers*. Contact her at [yolinieves@msn.com](mailto:yolinieves@msn.com).