Poemas

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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.

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.