Poems

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Her knees have spent a year on the floor. They are callous from praying and scrubbing tiles in rich neighborhoods. The joint in her hands are bulbous from hard labor; they look beaded when locked in a prayer.

*See the black and white photo of her daughter? The eyes are deep, a smile as wide as country.*

Her daughter crossed *la frontera* to *el norte*. It is always north: Juarez, Laredo, Los Angeles, Seattle, Chicago, New York - the white frontiers. Cloudy. Cold. Most evenings she weaves fiber into tapestry, pulling under and over the loom bought with some money her daughter had sent

...*some years ago.*

A neighbor woman with a warm heart sits in a chair next to her. Quiet words tossed lightly back and forth across cloth and loom softens the chill that makes her throat tight as if a round stone had slowly grown there. She touches a letter in her pocket her daughter had mailed

...*some years ago.*

Some women quarrel and hold loneliness like a hot coal against their breasts. Others sit steamy biting their nails. Some women listen to music but do not dance. Others cry ceaselessly. This one sits by a window until morning holding the letter close to her breast, the ink in the letter fades.
advice to a good daughter

I give you permission to be sin verguenza.
to walk in a world of smokey cigars, carburetor oil
and broken beer bottles without shame.

Don't eat your inside out waiting for
the dance to begin
or speak only when you are spoken to
or sit on a chair like a package strapped
by ribbons and bows.

Wear your tattoo proudly. Let your eyes meet
their head on. Bellow out the truth. Let your
words sting like sunburn. A dart hitting a bull's eye.

Step in some mud. Rub it in someone's face
once in awhile. Run into the rain without
an umbrella. Drink tequila straight from
the bottle. Sing your songs hardy and late
into the night until you laugh and cry
at the same time.

Come home late without a proper excuse
embroider your own life
then sleep in a prayer.
Yes, mi hija
I give you permission to be
sin verguenza.
From a Documented Emigrant

to an

Undocumented Immigrant

I know you must cross deserts and mountains, even an ocean. The nights are frigid and tight like a fist. You will walk under the heat of the sun. Hope grows like wild onions you are forced to eat. You carry a knife but it cannot cut the web of melancholy that has spun around your dreams. To pay for emergencies your uncle sent you money curled in a rubber band, stuffed in a sock. A woman walked between blue and black, this money tucked under her breast. She knocks at your door. Her story is another story. You are to tell no one you have any.

Your father shook your hand and sniffed into his dusty handkerchief. Your mother boiled eggs, wrapped some bread and cheese in a cloth, tucked it into your hands. She held you so tight your breath shrank in your eyes while she wept in her apron—the one you gave her last year. That night your neighbors lit a candle, held their rosaries a bit tighter praying vaya con Dios. Reaching the bend in the road you glance back one last time. Your eyes stretched to engrave the horizon in your heart. It throbbed in your throat.

Stuffed into a freight truck or a cargo ship, fifty others have the same dream. You wonder if there is room for all of you across the border. I did, too.

Our families arrive awkward together. We wash the same dishes, take care of each other’s children, sleep to dream the same dreams, invent other lives. You are my brother. Your daughter is my daughter. Our hearts beg us to go home, our stomachs remind us of our hunger. We squeeze work like a woman does water from her hair. In this country we are whispers, an echo bleeding only after our day’s work. Eyes erase us. We tiptoe not to startle the hope that flutters tiny. We will not be ashamed of our fifteen syllable name. I want to pour the strength of stones into your eyes and make our exile weightless. We can’t reach where we want to go alone.

This poem can be translated into any language.

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, and Eclectic Anthology of Fiction & Poetry by Multicultural Writers. Contact her: yolinieves@msn.com

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