

2013 National Poetry Slam
Boston, MA

Every day when I was five, my older sister would play teacher.
Her students were me, my stuffed rabbit and an American girl doll,
She'd line us up at the end of the bed and teach us whatever she'd learned in school that day.

Now, she teaches ESL at an elementary school in Boston
and every week she tells me stories about her students.
Ana does not know how to read in Spanish, much less English
but she still wants to be a writer when she grows up.
Juan chooses to stay inside and study at recess so that one day he'll be able to teach his own
brother.

These kids are good organs in a sick body.
In 2001, No Child Left Behind
gutted bilingual education.
Students who have been in the country for one year
are now expected to perform at grade level
on standardized English tests.
My sister is not allowed to instruct them in Spanish.
If the kids don't jump high enough, the school loses money
Improving a school by picking its pockets
is like tuning a guitar by ripping off the strings.

Learning to read in a new language
before you can even read in your own
is like learning to walk while a pit bull is chasing you.
Like learning to sing with the conductor's fist down your throat

This year, for my sister's birthday,
I bought books for her students.
A poem on one page in Spanish, the next in English.
She is not allowed to help them read the first.
Their heritage is a banned book

Learning to read in a new language
when you can't even read in your own
is like trying to heal a burn victim by drowning them.
We are telling these children
who have spent their whole lives in the deep end
that they'll learn how to swim if they just float out a little farther.

In the 1980s, American slaughterhouses
began building corrals in curves,

so no animals could see the blood at the end of the tracks.
This is how we kept them moving forward.
In 2001, we began building the hallways of our schools in curves.
This is how we keep them moving forward.

You never learn, you fail the test
You never learn you fail the test
You never learn, you drop out.

I know, I am lucky enough to be one of the winners of this game.
I was handed a head start
and a rulebook in my own tongue

but the winners of a rigged game
should not get to write the rules.

On the television,
some senator preaches that throwing money
at an “urban school” is like feeding caviar to your dog.
They just won’t know how to appreciate it.
After all, if these parents can’t take care
of their own children, why should we?

Well tell that to Ana
who has my sister translate newsletters aloud to her father
because he, too, was never taught how to read

Tell that to Juan
whose mother and baby brother are still in Guatemala
whose father works three jobs.

My sister tells me school is the most stable place in these kids’ lives.
She has been a teacher since she was smaller than they are.
But since when does being a teacher mean having to swear not to help?
Since when does being a teacher mean having your hands tied
as the schoolhouse burns to the ground?
We are leading these children along a track built in circles
as their lungs fill with smoke
telling them it is their fault
they can’t find a way out.

[[Voiceover]] Dylan Garity from Slam MN