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Healing the Future (Writing From My Bed, My Garden)

Grisel Yolanda Acosta

I.

Nova and I meet at Harlem's Café Largo, both there for poetry,
far from her tiny Texas town and my Chicago.

We bond, being the only Latinas there more likely to wear creepers than sneakers.

II.

I learn that Nova is a Bill Gates Millennium Scholar.

She is earning her Ph.D. at Columbia; I am in total awe.

Nova can dance, wear sparkly nail polish, and has a Monty Python sense of humor.

She is also younger than me.

I consider her a prodigy.

III.

Nova's artwork is featured in the follow-up to *This Bridge Called My Back:*

This Bridge We Call Home. See? Prodigy.

Somehow, she gets me on the bill to read my poetry at the book kick-off.

When I read about the complexities of being Cuban and Colombian

at the Audre Lorde Project in Brooklyn,

all the women treat me as if I am home.

Nova is now a sister, a gift.

IV

I host countless poetry, art, and music events in New York.

Nova is always a tireless part of them. She paints

with a tablecloth canvas, cleaning supply brushes,

all to connect with one event's theme:

The working-class take back Manhattan.

Occupy will not happen until seven years later.

V.

Nova happily helps me with my own Ph.D. application.

I have been working four jobs, including endless adjunct work.

She also writes a stellar recommendation.

When I get into the program in Texas, she will revisit her home state and create

a magical art show. Nova's work fills the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center

in San Antonio with images of women, family, and fragile relationships.

She returns to New York, ready to finish her dissertation.

VI.

Nova and I have both seen friends and family die or wither

because of racism, sexism, and classism. Violence, alcoholism, the struggle of poverty
is as real as a brutally beaten aunt, or relatives in a distant country living in a shanty shack.

We know graduating isn't just for us.

She works six days a week and opens an art gallery in Harlem that features artists of color.

I volunteer teaching poetry and advocate for the poor.

We do not get enough sleep. Ever.

VII.

Crossing the stage to be hooded, I cannot breathe.

My lungs are working at 20 to 30 percent, still I walk.

Upon visiting Nova, in town for an interview, I notice the weight of academia

has changed her, too. She frightens me. She doesn't look well.

I tell her to take care of herself, aware that I must take care of myself, too.

My body is already so damaged; I begin to bleed so much that I often cannot leave home.

VIII.

New York City is happy to have me back and I find work easily.

However, it is hard to ignore that I am clearly a token.

How can colleges that are over 70 percent Latino/a have one Latina in the English Department?

When I tell my chair that I need surgery, she changes the subject.

Later, she wishes me luck with "all that."

I decide to take my token-self to another college.

IX.

Before I have the chance to schedule my surgery,

Nova is admitted to the Columbia-Presbyterian ICU.

She has undergone brain surgery to remove a massive clot.

I regret not saying more when I suspected she was not well.

Doesn't everyone who has earned a Ph.D. look like that?

Her sister Alyssa and her mother greet me with such respect and dignity when I visit.

I let them know that, within a few weeks, I will be having surgery, too, one building over.

X.

My doctor removes 21 tumors from my abdomen.

I am bundled like a baby and depend on the kindness of nurses.

Vincent, my husband, takes care of my parents who have flown in from Florida.

Everyone puts on a brave face when they watch me struggle to walk to the bathroom.

When I return home, I must lie down 90 percent of the time.

The view in front of me is one of Nova's paintings:

Three women, brave, saturated in color.

XI.

I learn from Facebook updates that Nova has been moved.

She is in rehab now, learning to walk and talk again.

Her parallel struggle fortifies my own steps.

Yet, I can't help wonder why we, two strong,

young, educated women, dedicated to our communities,

must break under the burden of our love of progress.

The sacrifice seems unjust.

XII.

My grandmother's name was Justicia.

After my grandfather died, she raised two generations of a resilient family.

When she saw, in her old age, she was no longer needed,

she gathered everyone, said, "Give me a minute," and then left forever.

Nova and I have so much to give, like Justicia.

We are not ready to go, we are needed, but our bodies

cannot bear being the bridge. We cannot heal ourselves

while trying to heal the future, ensure our daughters

are never tokens, never condescended to.

I fear dying in the street like Julia de Burgos.

XIII.

My best friend Nancy's mother, Zoila,

had a heart transplant after years of working multiple jobs.

The muscle in her chest was the size of a basketball.

She survived the surgery, lives well today, and her whole family is stable and happy.

Perhaps Nova and I can bear the weight, heal ourselves

and the future. I've dreamed of my artistic vision coming to life like a Julie Taymor production.

Does obligation to my Bronx students cancel that out, or is it part of it?

Was Nova's gallery, Azucarera, just a short-lived wish?

No. Our scars are the vision, like pricked and cut fingers weaving lace,

like blistered hands carving a language into stone,

our scars will toil and turn the garden where we can all be free to dream.