

POEM: *My Grandfather Without Borders*

Aaron Lopez

One of 22 children in the mountains of Venezuela.
His mother had her first child when she was 14 and her last at 44.
He was ambitious and desperately poor - without good shoes or clothes.
The son of farmers who could not forget the injustices of land stolen.

He had come so far... to now stare back into the eyes of mocking hate.

The young man dreamt of a better life.
He crossed borders at 19 and landed in the freezing rain of a DC in December.
Cold, alone, and undocumented – he knew he must be strong.
From the strength... came stubbornness and pride.

***Taunts – instead of assistance – from the owners of a greasy gas station in the
snows and cutting winds of an Appalachian town.***

My grandfather, NoNo, worked as a busboy and a waiter.
He learned English.
He graduated from NOVA.
Then he took one class a semester at George Mason, every year, while working
two jobs until he graduated from college one month before my dad graduated from
high school.

***The same dad who lifted me up off the ground as I began screaming at the men
with the smirking, scarred faces.***

He became a citizen of the United States.
A credit to his community and all who knew him.
He ended his career as an executive in the hotel industry.
From abject poverty he built a life for himself and his family.

***Dad carried me kicking back to the frozen and broken car violently shaking with
tears.***

No one ever saw my grandfather cry - except twice.
Once when my grandmother passed away.
And once when my father took him to see his boss at the White House.
A father's pride.

Screams and threats in the back seat to “burn their place down” met only by my dad’s curt, “Stay here... NoNo’s got it under control.”

In the car ride home from the White House, he said softly "Solamente en los Estados Unidos...solamente en los Estados Unidos."

Only in America.

And the tears fell.

Only in the United States could a poor farmer boy with nothing have a son grow up to work for the President.

Walking back to the car... NoNo said nothing, but the car was fixed.

Who cares about the hateful taunts of two bigots?

Or the countless taunts over the years from the ugly and unthinking?

But to witness it – and know the pain it must have caused...

And then to realize NoNo’s strength – his self-knowledge – to be able to endure and turn it into something else... to see his pride.

To stare back into the eyes of hate and not to yield...

I see that pride every day in NoNo’s eyes and I see it when he looks at me with hope.

A hope that I cannot ignore...

That I must not forget...

That I will never let down.