

Native Tongues

Ashley Sanchez

If you ask me if I know Spanish
I'll tell you a story about how a young man and woman fled
Two countries ravaged by war.
I'll tell you how they were from El Salvador and Nicaragua
I'll tell you where those countries are.
If you ask me if I know Spanish
I'll tell you how those two torn-apart countries
Brought my mother and father together.
My Spanish
It sits and waits for you to finish speaking.
My Spanish
Is me looking over my parents' emails
On the lookout for grammar mistakes and misspellings
Because they are worried
That they won't be taken seriously.
My Spanish,
It acts as a border line,
The line between Latino and American.
It doesn't know what to call itself.
If you ask me if I know Spanish
I'll tell you how my grandma carried a culture on her back
When she fled across golden deserts to
America.
She tried to tie herself down to an English-speaking post,
But always came running back to her native tongue.
If you ask me if I know Spanish,
I'll tell you my people are
"I always wear my heels to the Quinceañera" people,
"Pero like" people,
"Ay, dios" people,
"Ya comiste niña? Tienes hambre?" people,
"No me digas!" people.
I'll tell you that
There's no telling us to be quiet
When we spent so long finding our voices.

I'll tell you how English sits remixed in our mouths,
So that sleep becomes "esleep"
And Facebook is "feisbu."
I'll tell you that my Spanish
Wants to know why
Brown skin is beautiful on a white girl,
But on me it's dirty
On me, it's "can you please make your face a shade paler?"
On me, brown skin is an open invitation to ask
"How did your parents get here?"
My Spanish wants you to know that
My people are not exotic.
We are not spicy.
My Spanish wants you to know that
Spicy is reserved for our food.
My Spanish wonders if it has an
Expiration date.
It is a flame we snuffed out once we
Realized
Spanish
Leads to
"Go back to your country"
And
"This is America!"
And
It leads to all the Latinos in my
Grandma's apartment being told we
Had to move out.
My Spanish,
It is proud.
It makes mistakes.
It is in my hair, my skin.
My Spanish knows that there will
Always be words that escape me.
My Spanish is unapologetic.

San Domenico School, 12th Grade, Second Place