Discovering your voice through poetry—Rafael Campo’s Poems

*Morbidity and Mortality Rounds*

By Rafael Campo

Forgive me, body before me, for this. Forgive me for my bumbling hands, unschooled in how to touch: I meant to understand what fever was, not love. Forgive me for my stare, but when I look at you, I see myself laid bare. Forgive me, body, for what seems like calculation when I take a breath before I cut you with my knife, because the cancer has to be removed. Forgive me for not telling you, but I’m no poet. Please forgive me, please. Forgive my gloves, my callous greeting, my unease—you must not realize I just met death again. Forgive me if I say he looked impatient. Please, forgive me my despair, which once seemed more like recompense. Forgive my greed, forgive me for not having more to give you than this bitter pill. Forgive: for this apology, too late, for those like me whose crimes might seem innocuous and yet whose cruelty was obvious. Forgive us for these sins. Forgive me, please, for my confusing heart that sounds so much like yours. Forgive me for the night, when I sleep too, beside you under the same moon. Forgive me for my dreams, for my rough knees, for giving up too soon. Forgive me, please, for losing you, unable to forgive.
Wilhelmina Shakespeare
By Rafael Campo

Blond hair, blue eyes, buck teeth: we taunted you because of your intelligence. You loved to read, and secretly I envied how you gave yourself to poetry, alone beneath the shade a mango tree provided. We dubbed you “Wilhelmina Shakespeare” when we locked you in the basement, proving force could triumph over wisdom. “She’s a witch!” we bellowed as we torched your diary—but nothing we could do would make you cry. You knew the scientific names of rocks; you tried to teach me Spanish once, but I responded to your questions in pig Latin.

At night, when all my other cousins watched reruns of “Hawaii 5-0,” I’d sneak away to spy on you. Out on the porch, you’d be there with your sketch pad studying the moths that crowded the bare lightbulb, starved for that dim light, that least illumination.

Your features softened as I gazed at you: I understood my insignificance as I saw it was possible to know the beauty in even the plainest things.