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Vanessa E. Vega, *University of Alabama at Birmingham*

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Resiliency Redefined: We Never Understood Why

Vanessa E. Vega

University of Alabama at Birmingham

This is a poem aiming to redefine what resiliency has meant to the Latina/o/x families whose children were detained upon entering the United States.

Keywords: Latina/o/x | immigration | detention of minors

Why you cringed at the smooth touch of a hand lightly
caressing the surface of your
weathered
and
leathered
skin.

Why you awoke choking with sobs,
robbing the safety of your
ragged
and
chafed
slumber.

Why your eyes seemed drawn to the floor
searching for comfort among the divots and crevices of
dense
cold
concrete.

Why you wandered among the wilderness of isolation
pleading for love that was
silently elusive
strangely confusing
intangibly absent
desired, yet void
feared, yet coveted
stollen and withheld.

You (do not) recognize me.

I am your mother,
I am your grandmother,

Vega – *Resiliency redefined*

I am your sister,
I am your aunt,
I am your future daughter.

You are a child.

You are a rapist.

You are a child.

You are a criminal.

You are a child.

You are a bad hombre.

You are a child.

Without your mother,
without your grandmother,
without your sister,
without your aunt,
without your future daughter –
for the dream intended to save you
has robbed and jailed you,
criminalized you against your future self.

For you, there is no American Dream
only American Heartache
draping you with thin films of aluminum -
a blanket of discomfort wrapping your tender body with
fear and anxiety.

America has no place for you.

*“Our way is the right way – I shouldn’t have to speak in your
language. This is America.”¹*

You are a child.

You are an alien.

You are a child.

You are a wetback.

You are a child.

Go back to where you came from.

As you peer through the raw outlines of
steeled barriers, the air still brimming with cold fridity,
your small hands grasp for
Mámi,
Mamá,

¹ Blitzer, J. (2017, June 24). *A veteran ICE agent, disillusioned with the Trump era, speaks out.*
<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-veteran-ice-agent-disillusioned-with-the-trump-era-speaks-out>

Madre,
who is not here.
Where has she gone?
Where have they taken her?
Will you see her again?
You do not understand.
When will she return?
Why has she left you?

Where is my mommy?
Donde está mi mamá?
Where's my mommy?
Donde está mamá?
Mámi!
Mamá!

Madre!
M A M A!
M A M A!
M A M A!

*"We seem to be targeting the most vulnerable people, not the worst."*²

Your eyes brim with questions that have no answers.
And yet ...
the answers are easy -
as easy as a clenched fist slowly releasing its grip
as easy as a rigid body limply embracing warm touch
as easy as opening a wall of compassion.

We never understood why
America the great separated you from your family.
Adults in bullet proof vests and rugged khaki cargo pants
routinely yanked children from their mothers and fathers.
Four months old was the youngest.
And the children, including you, wept until their blood-rimmed eyes
could no longer contain their fatigue
and they slept in fits and choked slumber.

Your family was guilty
of placing you

² Blitzer, J. (2017, June 24). *A veteran ICE agent, disillusioned with the Trump era, speaks out.*
<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-veteran-ice-agent-disillusioned-with-the-trump-era-speaks-out>

“Directly in harm’s way.”³

America the great combatted a humanitarian threat –
the children had to be

detained,
seized,
incarcerated.

And the families feared prosecution, so
the children remained

detained,
seized,
incarcerated.

America the great, where the life of a child
was less important than freedom for all.

The color of your skin,
the singing of your native language – el cánto de tu lengua natal,
the country of your birth – el paíz de tu infáncia

vilified,
pilloried,
maligned.

Trauma trumped humanity.

We are mothers with no children.
We are grandmothers with no kin.
We are sisters with no siblings.
We are aunts with no nieces or nephews.
We are daughters with no parents.

We are the collective voices
who bellow
and wring our hands
without knowing what to do.

Like wombs who carried
thriving and gurgling bebesitos,
once ripe with fertility and solace –
now barren with sterility and anguish.

You are one of five children,
every day,

³ Blitzer, J. (2017, June 24). *A veteran ICE agent, disillusioned with the Trump era, speaks out.*
<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-veteran-ice-agent-disillusioned-with-the-trump-era-speaks-out>

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who were taken from your family.

You are one of 4,368 children,⁴
in three years,
who were taken from your family.

America poisoned your future.
America stole your youth.
America battered your innocence.
America neglected your body.
America broke your ancestry.
The land of the free and home of the brave
repeated its “Never Agains”
in the most gruesome way possible.

Zero tolerance -
asylum and refugee no longer apply.
Trauma trumped humanity.

Author Note

Vanessa E. Vega is the director of the Office of Clinical Experiences at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She received her BA from Purdue University, an M.Ed. from Rutgers University, and an Ed.S. and Ph.D. from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Her primary research interests center Latina teachers and the use of social justice-oriented young adult literature to explore counter-narratives and lived experiences. She is committed to exploring experiential knowledge by stretching notions of “traditional” academic writing by way of creative non-fiction. Her creative work often examines her own lived experiences of navigating murky spaces, swimming contra la corriente.

⁴ Southern Poverty Law Center. (2020, June 17). *Family separation under the Trump administration – a timeline*. <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2020/06/17/family-separation-under-trump-administration-timeline>