

ADULT LITERACY

Carmen writes of the island
poverty and pregnancy
stole from her. She remembers
cows huge as giants
munching their cuds beside the river
where at three, she and her sister Marta
dangled ankle-deep
in the clear, dark pool
til Mama came
to warn them
of cows and the river.

Doretha recounts the texture
of North Carolina summers,
remembers the pungent smell
of cow manure, the thick
dark clots of molasses
on Grandma Orley's johnny cakes,
recalls the almost human squeal
a hog makes when slaughtered
and Grandpa's admonitions to be proper.

Evelyn remembers a father's wounds,
some stranger coming through
the thicket to the door,
their mother sobbing in the back room
their being told to pick up satchels
head for school,
the children, tripping silent
and bewildered
past the church,
the solemn fort,
beneath the swaying palms,
far out, the roar of morning surf.

Audrey recalls red bicycles

left behind when they had to move,
Aunt Lily's habit of burning rice
and black-eyed peas,
the same smell that night
returning, from Aunt Lily's
they found mattresses in the front yard,
broken windows, and the
charred ruins of innocence.

Pedro recalls the skinny dogs,
the pigs and chickens underfoot,
Milagros at the fire
tortillas frying
when the *Guardia* arrive,
their vacant eyes,
the cold slam of a rifle butt,
the icy grip of fear.

All this,
conveyed in the South Bronx
between accordion walls,
that barely muffle the tones
of a lecture next door on synonyms,
the hiss and moan of sclerotic radiators
bucket seats stiff
beneath bodies that have already registered
eight hours of exhaustion
in nursing homes lifting bedpans,
at barred counters filling forms,
in windowless sweatshops
sewing zippers and hems.

All this, says Pedro,
so we can use our own names,
and write the laws by which we live.

--Sheila D. Collins

