Judith Ortiz Cofer’s “One More Lesson”  
(from *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*)

I was escorted each day to school by my nervous mother. It was a long walk in the cooling air of fall in Paterson and we had to pass by El Building where the children poured out of the front door of the dilapidated tenement still answering their mothers in a mixture of Spanish and English: “Si, Mami, I'll come home straight from school.” At the corner we were halted by the crossing guard, a strict woman who only gestured her instructions, never spoke directly to the children, and only ordered us to “halt” or “cross” while holding her white-gloved hand up at face level or swinging her arm sharply across her chest if the light was green.

The school building was not a welcoming sight for someone used to the bright colors and airiness of tropical architecture. The building looked functional. It could have been a prison, an asylum, or just what it was: an urban school for the children of immigrants, built to withstand waves of change, generation by generation. Its red brick sides rose to four solid stories. The black steel fire escapes snaked up its back like an exposed vertebra. A chain-linked fence surrounded its concrete playground. Members of the elite safety patrol, older kids, sixth graders mainly, stood at each of its entrances, wearing their fluorescent white belts that criss-crossed their chests and their metal badges. No one was allowed in the building until the bell rang, not even on rainy or bitter cold days. Only the safety-patrol stayed warm.

My mother stood in front of the main entrance with me and a growing crowd of noisy children. She looked like one of us, being no taller than the six-grade girls. She held my hand so tightly that my fingers cramped. When the bell rang, she walked me into the building and kissed my cheek. Apparently my father had done all the paperwork for my enrollment, because the next thing I remember was being led to my third-grade classroom by a black girl who had emerged from the principal’s office.

Though I had learned some English at home during my first years in Paterson, I had let it recede deep into my memory while learning Spanish in Puerto Rico. Once again I was the child in

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1 reduced to or fallen into partial ruin or decay, as from age, wear, or neglect  
2 a run-down and often overcrowded apartment house, esp. in a poor section of a large city  
3 having or serving a utilitarian purpose; capable of serving the purpose for which it was designed  
4 to become more distant
the cloud of silence, the one who had to be spoken to in sign language as if she were a deaf-mute.
Some of the children even raised their voices when they spoke to me, as if I had trouble hearing.
Since it was a large troublesome class composed of mainly black and Puerto Rican children, with a
few working-class Italian children interspersed, the teacher paid little attention to me. I re-
learned the language quickly by the immersion\textsuperscript{5} method. I remember one day, soon after I joined
the rowdy class when our regular teacher was absent and Mrs. D., the sixth-grade teacher from
across the hall, attempted to monitor both classes. She scribbled something on the chalkboard and
went to her own room. I felt a pressing need to use the bathroom and asked Julio, the Puerto Rican
boy who sat behind me, what I had to do to be excused. He said that Mrs. D. had written on the
board that we could be excused by simply writing our names under the sign. I got up from my desk
and started for the front of the room when I was struck on the head hard with a book. Startled
and hurt, I turned around expecting to find one of the bad boys in my class, but it was Mrs. D. that
I faced. I remember her angry face, her fingers on my arms pulling me back to my desk, and her
voice saying incomprehensible things to me in a hissing tone. Someone finally explained to her that
I was new, that I did not speak English. I also remember how suddenly her face changed from
anger to anxiety. But I did not forgive her for hitting me with that hard-cover book. Yes, I would
recognize that book even now. It was not until years later that I stopped hating that teacher for
not understanding that I had been betrayed by a classmate, and by my inability to read her warning
on the board. I instinctively understood then that language is the only weapon a child has against
the absolute power of adults.

I quickly built up my arsenal\textsuperscript{6} of words by becoming an insatiable\textsuperscript{7} reader of books.

\textsuperscript{5} state of being deeply engaged or involved; absorption
\textsuperscript{6} a collection or supply of anything
\textsuperscript{7} incapable of being satisfied