“Spic” by Julia Alvarez

Out in the playground, kids were shouting Spic! lifting my sister’s skirt, yanking her slip. Younger, less sexy, I was held and stripped of coat and bookbag. Homework tumbled out into oncoming traffic on the street. Irregular verbs crumpled under tires of frantic taxis, blew against the grates of uptown buses we would later take when school let out, trailed by cries of Spic! What did they want, these American kids?

That night when we asked Mami, she explained: our classmates had been asking us to speak, not to be so unfriendly, running off without a word. “This is America! The anthem here invites its citizens to speak up. Oh see, can you say,” she sang, proving her point, making us sing along. She winked at Papi, who had not joined in but bowed his head, speaking instead to God to protect his daughters in America.

I took her at her word: I raised my hand, Speaking up during classes, recess time. The boys got meaner. Spic ball! They called out, tossing off my school beanie, playing catch While I ran boy to boy to get it back. They sacked my stolen lunch box for their snacks, dumping the foreign things into the garbage bin, Spic trash! But I kept talking, telling them how someday when I’d learn their language well, I’d say what I’d seen in America.