Back in Julia de Burgos Junior High, back in the days of my growing up and all that Piri Thomas kinda crap that I will spare you from, there was the English teacher, Mr. Blessington. He kept telling us boys we were all going to end up in jail and that all the girls were going to end up hooking. He would say these things right out loud and the administration wouldn't do anything. I hated Blessington and he knew it. He looked at Blanca with the eyes of a repressed rapist. He thought he was smooth but what he came out looking was creepy. He'd come to school in a suit and tell us that a man with a suit is a man that is valuable and that a man without a suit has no worth. He always did Robert Frost poems with us, which were all right, but after a while we started to hate Robert Frost. Blessington thought he was doing us a service, and that was his error. He was one of those upper-middle-class people who think highly of themselves because they could be making money or something, but no, they have taken the high road and have chosen to "help" poor kids from the ghetto.

On the other hand the science teacher, Jose Tapia, was always lecturing us on how fortunate we were because we were young and Latin. His speeches were at times so fiery and full of passion that every year the principal would try to make Tapia the gym teacher, in hopes of cutting down Tapia’s influence over us. But as a science teacher Tapia was state certified and was appointed to our school so there was no way for the principal to get rid of him.

And he didn’t want to be called Mr. Tapia, simply Tapia.

One day when Sapo and me were in the eighth grade, Tapia told us, “You speak two languages, you are worth two people.” Sapo retorted, “What about the pope? He speaks like a hundred languages, but he ain’t worth jack.” The class was rolled.

“Sapo, do you think the pope would be the pope if he didn’t know his hundred languages?” Tapia asked after the laughter died down.

“Nah, if he didn’t speak a hundred languages he’d still be pope, because he’s white. All popes are white. I ain’t never seen no black pope. I ain’t seen a Spanish pope, either.”

“Hey, Tapia,” I said, “I never even seen a black nun.” Of course we were just stalling. The truth was we hadn’t done our homework and wanted to kill time.

“Or a Chinese nun. All I’ve ever seen are white nuns,” Edwin jumped in, so I figured he hadn’t done his homework either. “You can’t have a black pope if there are no black nuns.” I hated Edwin. When he borrowed a pencil he never gave it back and when school was almost over, he always borrowed loose-leaf paper because he didn’t see the point of buying a new notebook.

“Yeah, a black nun!” Sapo shouted in agreement.

“Julio, can you shut him up?” Blanca whispered to me. I always sat next to Blanca. I would leave my science book at home on purpose so I could use the excuse of sharing hers. Tapia understood this and, even though we had assigned seats, would always let me move.
“No,” I whispered back at Blanca. “Sapo has a point.”
“The point is Sapo hasn’t done his homework.”
“I haven’t done mine, either,” I said.
“Then this book”—she pulled the science text we were sharing toward her side of the desk—“does you no good.”

“Look, forget about the pope,” Tapia continued. “I don’t care about the pope. The pope is not one of my students. The pope has a good job and there are black nuns and Chinese nuns, too, but that doesn’t matter. All that matters is you. I care about you. And I played the same games when I was your age. If you haven’t done your homework just tell me.” Hands shot up.
Tapia sighed loudly. “Edwin, you didn’t do your homework?”
“Yeah, I did.”
“Well?”
“Well, I did it, I just didn’t bring it.” The class laughed and Tapia looked at his roll book.

“All right, Edwin, you live on 102nd and Third. That’s three blocks from here. You better get your homework at lunchtime or you’d better have it done by then.” Edwin nodded his head.

“Sapo, your homework?”
“I didn’t do it.”
“Why didn’t you do it?”
“Because Mr. Blessington told me I was going to end up in jail, so why waste my time doing homework?” We all laughed.

“Sapo, don’t you want to prove Blessington wrong?”
“Nah, I’d rather not do my homework.”

Tapia got upset. He threw down the roll book and began to yell at us. “I don’t care what Blessington’s been telling you! If you are here it is because you want to be, right? Otherwise don’t even come to school, just stay on the street. You can make more money selling pot on the stairwells than coming to my classroom, but if you come—and I want you to come, I like having you here—all I ask is that you make an effort! That’s all I ask. Don’t give me this nonsense about what Mr. Blessington is telling you. You guys are smart enough to know that it’s up to you to become what you want to be. So why even listen to him? I’ve heard what he says. It’s all nonsense.” Tapia pointed at one of the girls. “Rita Moreno, she was once like you, is Rita Moreno hooking?” Tapia then pointed at one of the guys. “Reggie Jackson, he was once as young as you, he’s half Puerto Rican, is Reggie in jail? They worked hard. That’s what you have to do. Just do your work and don’t pay attention to Blessington.”

So we all quieted down and did our work, even Sapo, although he copied off me. Sapo always copied me but it was no big deal. The next period was English and we hated it because it was Blessington. I was in no mood for Robert Frost, that white-assed crusty old man from some cow state. But I couldn’t say that to Blessington. Instead, as politely as I could, I asked, “Mr. Blessington, why do we always do Robert Frost, why can’t we do someone else?”
“Because Robert Frost,” he said, slowly shaking his head in disbelief as if I was asking something real stupid, “is a major American poet.”

“Well, I heard that Julia de Burgos was a poet; why don’t we do some of her poems?” I said, and the class jumped in with me.

“That’s right,” Lucy, Blanca’s Pentecostal friend whom we used to call Chewbacca, chimed in, “why did they name the school after her? She must have been important.”

“Yeah, they didn’t name the school Robert Frost Junior High, why we always reading him?” someone else asked. Truth was, I was happy we were killing time. I wanted those forty-five minutes in his class to fly. I wanted to keep this discussion going for as long as possible.

“If any of you have noticed since September,” Blessington pointed out, “this is English class, not Spanish, Julia-day-Burgos”—he pronounced her name with a thick accent—“wrote only in Spanish.”

“But maybe she wrote in English too. I write in Spanish and in English sometimes,” Blanca said to him. Every time Blanca spoke Blessington would leer. It was one of those cartoon monster smiles, where the monster rubs his hands as he thinks of something dastardly.

“Listen, you people”—he always called us you people—“Julia-day-Burgos is so obscure it would be hard to find a single poem of hers. In any language.” I turned to Blanca and, whispering, asked what obscure meant. Sapo was quietly drawing all this time. He drew terribly, but it never stopped him. He mostly did it because he was bored. But I knew he was listening and could jump in any minute.

“But if she is so unknown,” I said confidently, emphasizing the word Blanca had provided to let Blessington know that I knew what obscure meant, “then I agree with Lucy, why did they name an entire school after her? Why not after someone famous?”

“Finally, a good question,” Blessington said, adjusting his tie and buttoning up his blazer. “I’ll tell you why: because the people in this district are simpletons, that’s why. District Four has no idea what it’s doing. The name they chose for this school was probably the worst name they could choose. Why, we teachers didn’t even know who she was when they renamed this place.”

“Mr. Tapia did,” Sapo piped up, leaving his drawing for a minute. We all knew what Blessington was saying was that none of the white teachers knew who she was, and they were the only teachers that mattered.

“Oh, him,” Blessington said in a tired voice. “Him again. Well, I heard he’s a good science teacher,” he said with a smirk, “but we’re in English now. You people need to get on with today’s work.” And it was all right with me because we had chopped off at least fifteen minutes of the period. Blessington then went to the board and wrote, “Analogies Between Frost’s Poems and New York City.” I turned around and asked Blanca what analogies meant. She told me. I laughed.

“What similarities?” I called out. Blessington was upset now.

“End of discussion,” he said. “Get out your homework.” Blessington walked over to Sapo’s desk.

“Enrique, where’s your homework?” Blessington asked.
"I'm going to jail, so why bother, right?" Sapo kept drawing. "Yo' the smart guy here, right, can't you figure that out yo'self?" The class went "Ooooh," which Blessington took as a challenge.

"You'll be lucky to even make jail," he said to Sapo.

"Why you snapping at me? I said you were right."

"I know I'm right. I'm doing all you people a favor. I say these things to you so you can maybe prove me wrong. Now, it's sad to say, but I've yet to see one of my Puerto Rican students, just one, prove me wrong. And I know it's not going to be Sapo here." Blessington then leaned over and took Sapo's drawing from him and crumpled it in his hands. Sapo got so mad, he shot straight up from his seat and thrust himself at Blessington so they were face to face.

"Thass right, I won't prove you wrong 'cause I'm going to jail for jamming your wife." The class was silent because that wasn't a snap any longer but an insult. They stared each other down for a second or two before Sapo turned around and headed for the door. "Where do you think you're going?" Blessington yelled, and went after Sapo, grabbing him by the shoulder.

"Don't touch me, man!" Sapo yelled, but Blessington didn't listen. I got up from my seat and went over to Sapo.

"Yo, take a chill pill," I said to Sapo. Blessington yelled at me, "I can handle this. Sit back down!" He didn't let go of Sapo. Sapo started to pull himself away and that's when Blessington made the mistake of putting Sapo in a headlock.

"Yo, you choking him!" I yelled, but Blessington kept at it, all the while cursing at Sapo. Blanca and her friend Lucy started to run out of the room to get the teacher next door. Blessington released Sapo and went after Blanca. And that's when Sapo jumped him from behind. Sapo crawled on Blessington as if Blessington were going to give him a piggyback ride. Before Blessington could shake Sapo free, Sapo dug his teeth into the base of the teacher's neck. Blessington screamed; the blood spurted out, running down his neck and staining his white shirt collar crimson. Sapo scrambled off Blessington's back as Blessington fell to his knees, pressing the wound with his hands. Then Sapo came around and grabbed Blessington's face in his hands and pulled it toward his own. Sapo spat out a chunk of Blessington's flesh, balking it off Blessington's left cheekbone. Covered in blood and saliva, Blessington's eyes were frozen in disbelief. He wasn't screaming. He was in shock. It was only when he saw a piece of his own flesh on the floor that he registered what had happened, and passed out.

Standing in front of the classroom Sapo smiled as only Sapo could; he slowly turned to the class, showing us his shining red teeth. He then calmly walked out of the room. Everyone was stunned. Blanca was the first one to shake herself and run out of the room. "Help us, help us, Blessington's dying!" she kept yelling down the hall. A minute later the school nurse arrived. When she saw all that blood on the floor she took off her smock and put pressure on Blessington's neck. Meanwhile I went looking for Sapo. He had stopped by the bathroom to rinse his mouth and when he saw me he laughed.

"The nigga had that shit coming." He spat water.

"Sapo, bro, what you gonna do?"
"I could give two fucks," he said. "I never felt better. It's as if I let some fucken courier pigeon go free." At that minute Tapia walked into the bathroom, his face red with fury. It was the same anger he would show us when we let him down by not behaving, by not doing work or getting in trouble.

55  "Did he really have you in a headlock?" Tapia asked Sapo.

   "Yeah, I saw it all, Ta—"

   "Shut up! I'm asking Sapo!" I quieted down and backed away. Sapo nodded and Tapia paced the bathroom. He sighed loudly. He stopped in front of Sapo and placed both arms on top of Sapo's shoulders.

   "Look at me," Tapia said. "Don't say that he had you in a headlock—"

   I jumped in. "But he did, Tapia—"

60  "Shut up, Chino! Corte, just shut up!" This time I did for good. Tapia breathed hard. His eyes were watery. "Sapo, look at me. If you say he had you in a headlock, when he recovers he will deny it. And it won't matter which of your friends backs you up, they will believe Blessington. Now, you listen to me and you listen good because I don't want you to go to Juvie. The police are on their way. When they ask you why you bit Blessington, you tell them you heard voices. You got that?" Sapo nodded. "You tell them the voices said to bite Blessington. You don't say Blessington said all this bull shit to you or that he had you in a headlock, you just say you heard voices. You got that?" Sapo understood and a slow smirk began to form on his big lips as he nodded. When he had completely registered what Tapia had told him, that smirk became a full blown smile.

That whole year Sapo saw a shrink and thus avoided juvenile detention. He must have lied, and I bet for a while he loved the opportunity to have an audience for those stories he was so good at making up. It was like getting away with biting Blessington's neck all over again. But then he got tired of it, started blowing off sessions, and ultimately he dropped out of school and moved out on his own. That year something happened to Sapo. He had always been Sapo but that year, after biting Blessington, he started turning into someone who wasn't afraid to die. It was the beginning of the adult Sapo. His was the sneaker you wouldn't want to step on because "sorry" wouldn't cut it. He became that person you wouldn't want to cut off in traffic because he'd pull a knife and slice you. He became that person you wanted on your side so you could unleash him on your enemies. Like the rest of us, Sapo was still a kid, but he was already turning into something else. He had reached that point in existence where he wasn't afraid to hurt anyone who threatened his only source of meaning, his love for himself.