Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, an Intelligent, Well-Read Person Could Believe in the War Between Races

In my land there are no distinctions. The barbed wire politics of oppression have been torn down long ago. The only reminder of past battles, lost or won, is a slight rutting in the fertile fields. In my land people write poems about love, full of nothing but contented childlike syllables. Everyone reads Russian short stories and weeps. There are no boundaries. There is no hunger, no complicated famine or greed. I am not a revolutionary. I don’t even like political poems. Do you think I can believe in a war between races? I can deny it. I can forget about it when I’m safe, living on my own continent of harmony and home, but I am not there. I believe in revolution because everywhere the crosses are burning, sharp-shooting goose-steppers round every corner, there are snipers in the schools… (I know you don’t believe this. You think this is nothing but faddish exaggeration. But they are not shooting at you.) I’m marked by the color of my skin. The bullets are discrete and designed to kill slowly. They are aiming at my children. These are facts. Let me show you my wounds: my stumbling mind, my “excuse me” tongue, and this nagging preoccupation with the feeling of not being good enough. These bullets bury deeper than logic. Racism is not intellectual. I cannot reason these scars away. Outside my door there is a real enemy who hates me. I am a poet who yearns to dance on rooftops, to whisper delicate lines about joy and the blessings of human understanding. I try. I go to my land, my tower of words and bolt the door, but the typewriter doesn’t fade out the sounds of blasting and muffled outrage. My own days bring me slaps on the face. Every day I am deluged with reminders that this is not my land and this is my land. I do not believe in the war between races but in this country there is war.

Lorna Dee Cervantes