

Where I'm From by Willie Perdomo

Because she liked the “kind of music” that I listened to and she liked the way I walked as well as the way I talked, she always wanted to know where I was from.

If I said that I was from 110th Street and Lexington Avenue, right in the heart of a transported Puerto Rican town, where the hodedores live and night turns to day without sleep, do you think then she might know where I was from?

Where I'm from, Puerto Rico stays on our minds when the fresh breeze of café con leche y pan con montequilla comes through our half-open windows and under our doors while the sun starts to rise.

Where I'm from, babies fall asleep to the bark of a German Shepherd named Tarzan. We hear his wandering footsteps under a midnight sun. Tarzan has learned quickly to ignore the woman who begs her man to stop slapping her with his fist. “Please baby! Por favor! I wear it wasn't me. I swear to my mother. Mameeee!!” (her dead mother told her this would happen one day.)

Where I'm from, Independence Day is celebrated every day. The final gunshot from last night's murder is followed by the officious knock of a warrant squad coming to take your bread, coffee and freedom away.

Where I'm from, the police come into your house without knocking. They throw us off rooftops and say we slipped. They shoot my father and say he was crazy. They put a bullet in my head and say they found me that way.

Where I'm from, you run to the hospital emergency room because some little boy spit a razor out of his mouth and carved a crescent into your face. But you have to understand, where I'm from even the dead have to wait until their number is called.

Where I'm from, you can listen to Big Daddy retelling stories on his corner. He passes a pint of light Bacardi, pouring the dead's tributary swig unto the street. "I'm God when I put a gun to your head. I'm the judge and you in my courtroom."

Where I'm from, it's the late night scratch of rats' feet that explains what my mother means when she says slowly, "Bueno, mijó, eso es la vida del pobre." (Well, son, that is the life of the poor.)

Where I'm from, it's sweet like my grandmother reciting a quick prayer over a pot of hot rice and beans. Where I'm from, it's pretty like my niece stopping me in the middle of the street and telling me to notice all the stars in the sky.

from "Respiration" by Mos Def/Black Star

The new moon rode high in the crown of the metropolis
Shinin', like who on top of this?
People was hustlin', arguin' and bustlin'
Gangstas of Gotham hardcore hustlin'
I'm wrestlin' with words and ideas
My ears is picky, seekin' what will transmit
the scribes can apply to transcript, yo
This ain't no time where the usual is suitable
Tonight alive, let's describe the inscrutable
The indisputable, we New York the narcotic
Strength in metal and fiber optics
where mercenaries is paid to trade hot stock tips
for profits, thirsty criminals take pockets
Hard knuckles on the second hands of workin' class watches
Skyscrapers is colossus,
the cost of living is preposterous,
stay alive, you play or die, no options
No Batman and Robin,
can't tell between the cops and the robbers,

they both partners, they all heartless
With no conscience, back streets stay darkened
Where unbelievers' hearts stay hardened
My eagle talons stay sharpened, like city lights stay throbbin'
You either make a way or stay sobbin',
the Shiny Apple is bruised but sweet and if you choose to eat
You could lose your teeth, many crews retreat
Nightly news repeat, who got shot down and locked down
Spotlight the savages, NASDAQ averages
My narrative, rose to explain this existence
Amidst the harbor lights which remain in the distance...