

Abuelas close
eyes and pray
While they watch
the children play
Not much I
can say
Except day turns
to night
And I can't tell what's
wrong from what's right
on 123rd Street

Where I'm From

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 mantequilla 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 swear it wasn't me. I swear to my mother. Mameeeei!" (Her dead mother told her that 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

Nigger-Reecan Blues

tributary swig onto 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, miijo, 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.

—Hey, Willie. What are you, man? Boricua? Moreno? Que? Are you Black? Puerto Rican?

—I am.

—No, silly. You know what I mean: What are you?

—I am you. You are me. We the same. Can't you feel our veins drinking the same blood?

—But who said you was a Porta-Reecan?

—Tu no ere Puerto Riqueño, brother.

—Maybe Indian like Ghandi-Indian?

—I thought you was a Black man.

—Is one of your parents white?

—You sure you ain't a mix of something like Cuban and Chinese?

—Looks like an Arab brother to me.

—Naahh, nah, nah . . . You ain't no Porty-Reecan.

—I keep tellin' y'all: That boy is a Black man with an accent.

If you look real close you will see that your spirits are standing right next to our songs. Yo soy Boricual Yo soy Africano! I ain't lyn'. Pero mi pelo is kinky y curly y mi skin no es negro pero it can pass . . .

—Hey, yo. I don't care what you say. You Black.

I ain't Black! Every time I go downtown la madam blankita de Madison Avenue sees that I'm standing next to her and she holds her purse just a bit tighter. Cabdrivers are quick to turn on their *Off-Duty* signs when they see my hand in the air. And the newspapers say that if I'm not in front a gun you can bet I'll be behind one. I wonder why . . .

Sangre en Harlem

You seen that movie

SANGRE EN HARLEM?

Blood in Harlem

starring some kid named Miguel

or some kid named José

or some kid named Kareem

or some kid named Daryl

or some kid . . .

Bloods are blue in the face

by the time Homicide arrives

The stage has been set for

me to die once again

Blood is blue in the night

filling the cracks in the street

All the props are real

After they bag me up

the bullets will keep singing

Next to the theater

street photographers

give lovers a chance

to freeze their romance

for five dollars you get

black velvet backdrops

French phones &

straw thrones

An old lady in the audience squeezes her grandson against her

bosom. Her tears fell a long time ago.

Unemployed Miami

Even though she don't have a job mami still works hard.

The last twenty-three years of her life haven been spent

teaching a poet and killing generations of cockroaches

with sky-blue plastic slippers, t.v. guides, and pink tissues.

She prays for the poet as he runs into the street looking

for images of Boricua sweetness to explode in his face.

The young roaches escape in the dark while my unemployed

mami goes to sleep cursing at them.

Even though she don't have a job mami still works hard.

She walked behind my drunken father, in the rain, as he

stumbled into manhood and oblivion in America wearing

his phony mambo king pinky ring. He beat my mami,

he beat my mami, stop beating my mami with the black

umbrella; the one with the fake ivory horsehead handle.

I still hear the same salsa blaring out the same social club

where I use to fall asleep and dream happy lives.

Even though she don't have a job mami still works hard.

Every year she prays for my abuela who died in a sweet

bed of Holy Water y Ben Gay while the poet was kicking

his mother inside her stomach. Mami looks at Miss America,

Miss Universe, Miss Everything, every year and then she runs

into her bedroom to dig out her high school yearbook from

underneath her pile of "important papers." "Look, Papo,

Look at your mother when she was eighteen years old. She

was pretty like those girls on t.v." You still are, I say.

Even though she don't have a job mami still works hard.

Lately, she plays slow songs of lost love over and over and

over. She looks out the window only when it rains, measuring

Song for Langston

tear drops against the rain drops. Where is that man, I wonder,
as I sit in my room writing and rewriting a poem for her.
I catch her peeking at me from the corner of her eye, wondering if
I do, I really do, love you and that's not the record, that's me, I say,
hugging her with a kiss.
Don't cry, mami.
Even though you don't have a job
I know you still be working hard.

I sang all night
And cried all day
Been waitin' for a
Storm to come my way
Drown the tears
Make soft the pain
I hope my prayers
Are not in vain

SIDA

comes for them—
But the music will stay
just like their rap,
check it:

“These young boys think they own the world. Looking like clowns
with all that fake gold hanging from their necks. Shittin’ where they
eat, driving crazy through the street, playing that loud stupid shit. I
be speaking to God every night and I be tellin’ him that tomorrow’s
light looks kinda bleak.”

This is true
I say as I step off
the m101
with the last poem I write
about a junkie.

Looking for happy endings

we came
over-extended familias
with secrets named
sofrito y salsa
that made broken homes smell
good from the outside
that made you run up the stairs
three steps at a time
Even third generation
Africans from North Carolina
started using Goya beans

Signs of life

were up on the wall
NO LOTTERING
NO RADIO PLAYING
NO SELLING DRUGS
NO TRESPASSING
NO SMOKING

We came to this skyscraped city

to live
to survive
to die
in concentration camps
named after
dead presidents
dead abolitionists
dead peanut farmers
whose names have no meaning

as we pray
and sing
in a night lit by candles
using
healing herbs
magic potions
to save the souls
of our children
who run hard and fast
looking for themselves

Number halls
behind bodegas
next to castas
by botanicas
keep history
on the same block
Cuchifrito Kitchens
can't compete
with take-out
chicken wing dynasties
because they don't accept
food stamps

On the second Sunday in June
you can watch us on Channel 11
parading down an avenue
that doesn't belong to us
singing a celebration of an island
that some of us will never see

We
Boricuas
Porta-Rocks
Spics
Goya-bean-eatin'-muthafu—
us was the first
to come in planes
no chains
just one-way tickets
to a sold-out dream

In order to understand
the pain and joy of all this
you must listen to Pancho
crouched low on the corner
refusing to learn English
singing the last song he
heard before he got on
the plane to New York

That night he went looking for
a poem

he left his electric typewriter humming
on the kitchen table
and ran out to the wide
sidewalks of Lenox Avenue

Aunties sat on their stoop box seats
mixing cheers and gossip
beers on the down low
With arms thrown to the sky
I celebrate a touchdown

A poet must look at the whole picture
One man's victory is stalked by another man's loss
The voice inside my head began to whisper:

Damn . . .

*One of them youngbloods might grow to
be a poet in Harlem
Or the little brother who caught the
game-winning touchdown might have to
sleep in the street one day*

That night he went looking for
a poem
he found two colors of love
A teenage couple embrace
by a bus-stop
I read his lips as they whisper
a sweet something into her smile
and that voice that never goes for a walk

comes to visit again:

*I hope
their dreams
come true*

In one ear and it stood
as the poet turned the corner
He bumped into an ancient argument
Two fallen angels with scratched throats
pull and push each other
Ain't enough for both of them to
get high tonight

Use to be
he would serenade her
under a clear moonlight
and that voice meets
him in front of the liquor store:

*Ain't no room for kissin' and huggin'
In the middle of the night
When luck is hard to find*

The poet came back to his
kitchen table with the last
voice that sounded like the blues
so he turned the electric hum into
this poem:

*Show me a woman
who is strung out on love
I want to support
her habit*

Postcards of El Barrio

are rarely ever
sent to me

hanging off a broken stick
a dull red, white and blue flag—
one star instead of fifty—blows
in a hot breeze of bullet beans

congas y timbales bingbangboom
down the block and back; our blood
stands on its toes and we start to dance

winos lean over their canes and begin
a different story with the same ending:
“Geronimo wasn’t shit compared to Papo”

chickens, rats, rabbits and cats are
tired of walking on broken-glass gardens;
they wait for the city to come and knock all
the gates down

once in a full blue moon rising above
crumbling gray rooftops I see a morenito
sitting on a stoop, licking the melting pineapple
ice off his palms

the violent revolutions of red and white police
sirens upset the sky blue peace of neon crucifixions

slow orange and yellow bulbs race around the
rims of stained bodega canopies. Hiding from the
rain, Old Man Jimmy sings the blues

postcards of El Barrio
are rarely ever sent to me

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Harlem Plays the Best Ball in the World

I’ve heard all the stories
about the black magicians
performing on courts
where you had to come
with your own tricks
if you wanted to play

I’ve heard all the stories
about the days destroyed
by a white horse that came
galloping through the Harlem village

Summer night stories
when fun was a game won
and then a turn-out-the-lights set
let’s rub a little kiss a little
we only got today forever, baby—
so can I have this dance

I’ve heard all the stories
about these legends
like The Goat who could
dunk twice in a single bound

Or the sound of Helicopter
rising to snatch a stack of
quarters off the top of
the backboard

And The Destroyer
who couldawouldashoulda
had a sneaker named after him

But the corner had more money
than the court

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Smoking Lovely

When you smoke crack
Everything is measured by

How fast your face melts,
If I can pull your eyes

Out of their sockets and
Your cheekbones bruise me

When I hug you or your
Lips scratch mine when we

Kiss then you must be
Smoking lovely.

Spotlight at the Nuyorican Poets Café

Finally fixed
I get to the café
in time for my spotlight.

I ask Julio the Bouncer if
he's gonna stay inside to
hear me read tonight.

He says only if I read something happy,
none of that dark ghetto shit because
tonight's crowd got him pissed. He is
the best random judge in the house as he
soothes a low scoring slam poet.

"C'mon, you know you can't
take this shit too seriously."

Julio strengthens my aesthetic as I
walk through the door and spot the
spoken word racketeers who
get close enough to dig into my
pockets when I fall asleep.

I just spent my last ten dollars
and they look at me stupid when
I ask if they can spare some
real change.

I was just a poet
wanting to read a poem
the first night I came here.
Since then
I have become a street poet
then somebody's favorite urban poet
a new jack hip-hop rap poet

a spoken word artist
a born-again Langston Hughes
a downtown performance poet
but you won't catch me rehearsing,
my spit is ready made real.

I walk up to the cherubic man with white hair
whose smile will not close until the
poetry café is torn down;
who will allow himself to die
only when love fails to create.
He starts telling me stories about
his soul brother
Milky the Junkie Christ
Creator of the ghetto Genesis where
Shit begat fucked up.
Saint Miguellito who saw God and said,
"Vayaaa! Papa Dio! Wassup?
I heard you got the good shit."
The cherubic man with white hair stays
alive by sniffing Milky's ashes
in the Avenue B air.

I go to the back of the bar
and sit next to the blind man who's
waiting for me to light his cigarette.
"Where you been you jive nigga you?
I'm glad you here
cuz these muthafuckas wanna cop pleas
and sell Cliff notes before they
read a goddamn thing."
A guest poet from the academy
is invited to the stage.
He begs the audience to be gentle because

his work is really built for the page.
The blind man tells him to
shut up
and read the goddamn poem.

I kiss the lady with the sunglasses,
sometimes used to deflect rays,
always to look where I can't see.
She's been taking notes on the scene,
watching poets exchange business cards
as they tap dance toward the stage.
She takes a moment to hug me tight and
begs me to take care of myself because the
bigger picture needs me.

The impresario leaps onto the stage,
grabs the mic and tells the DJ to give him a
hippiddy hop and a hippiddy ho,
"Is Word Perfect in the house?"
The flame on a white prayer candle above
the bar is doing the Cucaracha.
In the photo portrait behind it,
Milky is looking dead into the camera.
Before I reach the mic
the good Reverend Pedro hands me
a condom and says, Here, man.
Practice safe poetry tonight.
You never know what you might
Catch up there.

Champagne corks ricochet
Off ballroom walls

Roast pork burns while we
Puff and pass in project halls

Bullets kill El Barrio sky to
Celebrate holding it down
The same ole same ole shit we
Say every year

Fuck it

Pass that rum

It's cold out here

Who wants some?

You could say pleeze

You could freeze

Whatever

Happy New Years

Feliz Año Nuevo

I'm out here for a reason

Not the season

Should old shit be forgot

And all that good stuff

But I want my money

Before next year

Notes for a Slow Jam

The Notes

I wanted to play this like Petrarch and bless you with a suite of sonnets. But I can't rock sonnets, so I thought I would write you 100 letters for 100 days, but I'm getting discharged tomorrow morning so I'll say what I need to say on the back of this Patient Bill of Rights.

Yesterday my roommate asked me if I had a girlfriend out in the world. I told him about the night I watched you network a velvet lounge as Wynton Marsalis played a blues tribute for Albert Murray. During the solo I heard myself blow a quick *oh shit, who is that riff*, but that little voice that didn't like me convinced me that a woman whose laugh could play with music was too good for me.

My roommate said, "Damn, that's messed up," and went to the dayroom before I could tell him that the first time you and I made love we stood in bed for three days, had breakfast delivered, and listened to Robin Harris snap on Bebe's kids. I had your laugh all to myself.

Right now I'm looking out the window feeling the poem you always wanted about to drop like the heavy rain slapping the aluminum swing seats in Mount Morris Park. I see clearly through the tree-shaking thunder tapping the bell tower. Diamonds are dropping from the sky and I'm gonna play a solo before they call a melancholy snack time. Stray dogs bark at my soundproof window and I just hit my big bottom because the bass line dropped and all I want to know is: where's my funny valentine?

The Slow Jam

This is the poem you always wanted
I've turned into a fire-can crooner
to sing you this slow jam
a farewell greeting
no sooner than the sun set
on our meeting I had a
song for you
but first I had to sample
from the midnight quiet storm
Break up to make up and
make up to break up and
break up to wake up
I was a three-time loser
persistent fell in heart over
head not even a chance to
carve the initials of our romance
on the bark of a tree

There was nothing no one left to
point at and say it's all because of you
so I had an encounter session with my
bathroom mirror and those black
crescents that real make-up under my eyes
couldn't cover the cries that fell on the
street as I peaked on a broken
heart binge had to get high so I buy a
bag and go to Angel's Social Club where I
found the answer boiling in a juke box
pick a song
hip-hoppin' through life
I thought salsa was just for
the rice and beans
I was wrong

You'd probably think
I was high right now
if I told you that Tito Rojas
was a Greek playwright and
that Euripides had his own band

Listen to the tragic hero
chillin' on the corner
epics and shit spillin' from his mouth
and the chorus the chorus is throwing
echoes off the rooftop
Here it comes:
The *corazón* break

ay ay ay
Y dicen que los hombres
nunca nunca nunca nunca
deben llorar/ay ay ay
and they say that the men
should never never never cry

I looked into the mirror
one more time
before I chased you away
and just in case you don't speak Spanish
I leave you sinking in some
Muddy Waters like you can't spend
what you ain't got and you can't lose
what you ain't never had
My pockets are empty
and I'm letting you go
without a fight
but before you go
here's the poem
you always wanted

Word to Everything I Love

The day care picture book readers
Ring rosies and duck geoses
Around plastic pink chairs
You know you are in the right place
Where struggle is bilingual and
Over-worked workers of the world
Can only afford guitar licks to
Pay their membership dues

You hope that the jokes on
Dirty sneakers and generic blue jeans
Will not lead to a vicious paper chase
That when the roads are finally made
The corner drugstore cowboys will be
Left without their cocktail rocks and
Quicksilver last words so that when
Foreign documentary makers visit
Us with lab reports that erase the
High octave lean of our baseball caps
The hip-hop of our new sun language
We will look into the camera and
Recite the next line of poetry by which
The world will choose to live

I feel like dropping some bombs tonight
I have a milk crate bursting at the handles with
Muses that look like 3 x 7 memo pads but
I only need a minute of your time
If I told you that your woman was playing you dirty
And you asked me if I was for real
I would say, Word
Word to everything I love
Because that's what Brother Lo and them say
When they want you to believe them
More than you believe in the god of your choice
These poets who don't even know it
Will not put their palms
On a stack of black bibles
Or swear on the soul of an unborn child
If you find out they're lying
You can have everything they love

Here's bomb number one:
I want to give a shout out
To all those lyric poets
Who got low scores and left the short circuit
Through the back door
This is my word to everything I love
When you come back home
You expect welcome mats of damn
Where you been?
You look good
Is there anything I can do for you?
Anything you need?
But these are the same mats

You stepped on before
When you come back home
You expect the spotlight to be as bright
As the last time you got on stage
But the page flipped
And you got left out the next chapter
When you come back home
Everybody asks you if
You're working your steps
You say you closed your eyes
Took one giant step
And never looked back
Word to everything I love
This is what I'm telling you
After you make the love you dream of making
You come home to clean your closets
And make sure to keep the phone nearby
Just in case you bump into half of something
That will bring you back and
Hit you where it hurts

This blockbuster I give to the word hitters
Shadowboxing backstage
Making sure the last line fits
Let me a make a short story long
I want to tell you about the night I walked her
To an all-night Pathmark
It was snowing so much that
I felt like I was in a souvenir globe
The whole Goya bean section knew that we were in love
I carried her garlic, ginger and twist-off mop in one hand
Orange juice and scented candles in the other
She gave me her tongue in the vestibule and
Told me a secret

The next night we met in a garden filled with computers
We downloaded all kinds of flowers and trees
Word, word to everything I love
A few weeks later
Someone had sent her mouth
A giant AOL Instant Message smile
She roller-bladed to the clinic with Chuito de Bayamon
Blasting on her headphones
Don't you understand?
This is for you repeat offenders
In the final round
Who need new material
The song of the almost was
The call you get on the life line
Sounds like tears dropping into a voicemail
She would have wanted to wear ponytails to class picture day
She would have sketched a poem and left it on my pillow
She was surrounded by a circle of street pigeons in a city square
I miss train stops thinking of what her name
Would have been