

MIGUEL PIÑERO

A Lower East Side Poem

Just once before I die
I want to climb up on a
tenement sky
to dream my lungs out till
I cry
then scatter my ashes thru
the Lower East Side.

So let me sing my song tonight
let me feel out of sight
and let all eyes be dry
when they scatter my ashes thru
the Lower East Side.

From Houston to 14th Street
from Second Avenue to the mighty D
here the hustlers & suckers meet
the faggots & freaks will all get
high
on the ashes that have been scattered
thru the Lower East Side.

There's no other place for me to be
there's no other place that I can see
there's no other town around that
brings you up or keeps you down
no food little heat sweeps by
fancy cars & pimps' bars & juke saloons
& greasy spoons make my spirits fly
with my ashes scattered thru the
Lower East Side . . .

A thief, a junkie I've been
committed every known sin
Jews and Gentiles . . . Bums & Men
of style . . . run away child
police shooting wild . . .
mother's futile wails . . . pushers
making sales . . . dope wheelers
& cocaine dealers . . . smoking pot
streets are hot & feed off those who bleed to death . . .

all that's true
all that's true
all that is true
but this ain't no lie
when I ask that my ashes be scattered thru
the Lower East Side.

So here I am, look at me
I stand proud as you can see
pleased to be from the Lower East
a street fighting man
a problem of this land
I am the Philosopher of the Criminal Mind
a dweller of prison time
a cancer of Rockefeller's ghettocide
this concrete tomb is my home
to belong to survive you gotta be strong
you can't be shy less without request
someone will scatter your ashes thru
the Lower East Side.

I don't wanna be buried in Puerto Rico
I don't wanna rest in Long Island Cemetery
I wanna be near the stabbing shooting
gambling fighting & unnatural dying
& new birth crying
so please when I die . . .
don't take me far away
keep me near by
take my ashes and scatter them thru out
the Lower East Side . . .

This Is Not the Place Where I Was Born

puerto rico 1974
this is not the place where i was born
remember — as a child the fantasizing images my mother planted
within my head —
the shadows of her childhood recounted to me many times
over welfare loan on crédito food from el bodeguero
i tasted mango many years before the skin of the fruit

ever reached my teeth
i was born on an island about 35 miles wide 100 miles long
a small island with a rainforest somewhere in the central
regions of itself
where spanish was a dominant word
& signs read by themselves
i was born in a village of that island where the police
who frequented your place of business-hangout or home came as
servant or friend & not as a terror in slogan clothing
i was born in a barrio of the village on the island
where people left their doors open at night
where respect for elders was exhibited with pride
where courting for loved ones was not treated over confidentially
where children's laughter did not sound empty & savagely alive
with self destruction . . .
i was born on an island where to be puerto rican meant to be
part of the land & soul & puertorriqueños were not the
minority
puerto ricans were first, none were second
no, i was not born here . . .
no, i was not born in the attitude & time of this place
this sun drenched soil
this green faced piece of earth
this slave blessed land
where the caribbean seas pound angrily on the shores
of pre-fabricated house/hotel redcap hustling people gypsy taxi cab
fighters for fares to fajardo
& the hot wind is broken by fiberglass palmtrees
& highrise plátanos mariano on leave & color t. v.
looneytune cartoon comicbook characters with badges
in their jockstraps
& foreigners scream that puertorriqueños are foreigners
& have no right to claim any benefit on the birthport
this sun drenched soil
this green faced piece of earth
this slave blessed land
where nuyoricans come in search of spiritual identity
are greeted with profanity
this is insanity that americanos are showered
with shoe shine kisses
police in stocking caps cover carry out john wayne
television cowboy law road models of new york city detective
french connection/death wish instigation ku-klux-klan mind
panorama screen seems
in modern medicine is in confusion needs a transfusion quantity
treatment if you're not on the plan the new stand
of blue cross blue shield blue uniform master charge

what religion you are
blood fills the waiting room of death
stale air & qué pasa stares are nowhere
in sight & night neon light shines bright
in el condado area puerto rican under cover cop
stop & arrest on the spot puerto ricans who shop for the flag
that waves on the left-in souvenir stores —
puertorriqueños cannot assemble displaying the emblem
nuyoricans are fighting & dying for in newark, lower east side
south bronx where the fervor of being
puertorriqueños is not just rafael hernández
viet vet protest with rifle shots that dig into four pigs
& sociable friday professional persons rush to the
golf course & martini glasses work for the masses
& the island is left unattended because the middle class
bureaucratic cuban has arrived spitting blue eyed justice
at brown skinned boys in military khaki
compromise to survive is hairline length
moustache trimmed face looking grim like a soldier
on furlough further cannot exhibit contempt for what is
not cacique born this poem will receive a burning
stomach turning scorn nullified classified racist
from this pan am eastern first national chase manhattan
puerto rico . . .