

Where I'm From

Willie Perdomo

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Pre-Reading

When asked to describe where you are from, how do you usually respond?

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. 1

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. Mameeee!!" (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. 5

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 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, mijo, 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.

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Discussion Questions

1. Why is the speaker's friend so interested in him at first?
2. What elements of his neighborhood does the speaker emphasize?
3. Describe the relationship between the residents and the police.
4. What is the effect of beginning the second stanza with the conditional word "if"? Do you think that the speaker's friend will ever get the whole story of his culture and background?
5. Many of the descriptive scenes throughout this poem are harsh, but the final stanza is radically different. Discuss this shift in tone.
6. What is the effect of using so much Spanish in this poem? Refer to specific instances.

Writing Task

- Write your own "Where I'm From" poem. To do this, begin five stanzas with the dependant clause "Where I'm From, . . ." Complete each dependant clause with a descriptive passage that describes either your neighborhood or literally the place where you are from (if not New York).