

Where I'm From

By Willie Perdomo

Willie Perdomo is the author of *The Essential Hits of Shorty Bon Bon* (forthcoming from Penguin Poets in April 2014); *Smoking Lovely* (Rattapallax, 2003), winner of the PEN Beyond Margins Award; and *Where a Nickel Costs a Dime* (W. W. Norton, 1996), a finalist for the Poetry Society of America's Norma Farber First Book Award.

His work has appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, *BOMB*, *Mandorla*, and *African Voices*. He is a Pushcart Prize nominee, a former recipient of the Woolrich Fellowship in Creative Writing at Columbia University, and a two-time New York Foundation for the Arts Poetry Fellow. Perdomo is also founder/publisher of Cypher Books and is currently an English Instructor at Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire.

Where I'm From

[From *Where a Nickel Costs a Dime*. Copyright © 1996 W. W. Norton & Company]

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, 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.