Take Me to Church

by

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For my grandmother, Nancy Mercado.
Who never knew she shared a name with a famous poet.

For my grandfather, Randolfo Mercado.
Who still doesn’t know he is a poem.
When I was younger you lived eternally
And in our godless household
you were the sole deity

- Bhi Bhiman
When the World Was Flat

Papi Pichón hatched out of a poem, pink and dumb, a son to none. He grubbed on poison ivy, his nest was old newsprint.

He had no parents, just metaphor. His angular footprints were the guts of peace signs.

For centuries he marveled at babies flailing arms alongside their moms. He noted that this was our chance at learning to fly, each feather formed a wing which flew him to the mainland. For free.

This made him the smartest bird off the island. At least, that’s how the story goes.
You Left the Neighborhood

You left your old friends.

You left your parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles.

You left the corner store.

You left where you discovered gayness and cigarettes and pot and beer.

You left the thoughts of how they all complemented each other like skipping school and pizza.

You left the dirty mirror pics in the bathroom with the light on with laughter with the stained glass butterfly you made in a dusty summer.

(You left the mariposa strung up on the shower ganchos.)

You left memories of robbery that taught you what trust meant, what it felt like to have trust taken from you.

You left driveways where you’d ride scooters friends in circles taking turns to see who’d catch who.

The real catch:

there would be no one to chase unless someone left first so

you left the various colored stoops.

You left the side of the house that led you to church.
That showed you faith in anything.

You left the otherside that showed you the street.
That showed you the cutting of cement
skateboard wheels caught in cracks
the rock salt that split your knees.

You left chuletas.

You left learning 1 inch rakes
were not for show
that they broke pebbles and cultivated
dead flowers called addicts.

You left our saturated memories:

that time we were about to beat up Miguel’s drunk dad

or when dopehead Eddie went lugging down the hill with your
skateboard
when he never brought it back

when I was high and fell off the roof running from the cops
(we always laughed about
my hospital-to-prison transfer.)

Do you remember how we weren’t allowed upstairs at night?

How everything smelled like burnt plastic

and they blamed it on cheap incense?

Do you remember when one of us finally made money on the streets
and everyone helped me spend my first check (except you)

because

you left the blood on the walls
signing our names with punches.

You left those people, those noises-

the swings

the misses in half- hope attempts to find ourselves.

We were the tendons in your hand
  and when we separated you cried.
You broke the wall so hard
  the one we’re still trying to climb.

We left you before you left us
  and you know it was better that way.

We were your broken knuckles that kept you from making a fist

and sorry that a lot of us are left still punching.
Shadowboxing

In his youth grandpa pummeled the campo wise guy, calling each jab a gift to bet and drink on the dimes of every man beneath him. My family’s legacy consists of fists clenched tight, to wallop and maim and ball up the shamelessness boiled into our spines. Boxing was the product of our design, conceived in sancocho brine. Every one of my swings a comida del pobre story to swallow, in this fighting game where I am throwing hands in the high school bathroom for petty fame. Generations of island men created in the cockpits of backyards or back alleys of clubs and here I am with my opponent against the urinal smelling stale cheerios and recalling the viejos from the block, hit em’ with the bolo when he got his guard up...

Through the art of a fist-to-chin connection, human can make human’s blood trickle down slow like aloe, gushing succulent. In these moments I question where my hands have been: Swollen tendons making mountains of blueprints with spit and teeth, knuckles skin graphed on another man’s lips I wear as a flag.

I receive no answers— but who am I to wait for these hands to speak. A sack of daggers, a double-edged legacy set to perpetuate a sparring with myself. My shadow is my only resister, every bob and weave a whistling of whispers.
Summer Ave.
You taught me there is no God, no life after this life, so I know you are not watching me
type this letter over my shoulder — Martín Espada

I
Street corner,
this is a letter.

II
Today I lie next to you
where your weeds loiter
between seasons.

III
Turn me over in this bed
I have made of soda and spare
time. Make me visible only to
those who walk all over you.

IV
I miss the corner store dates
where ten swedish fish always
costs a dollar; feasting on gummies
until the sun went down.
Fish swimming down the drains
of our throats for freedom.

V
I can run my hands
down the small of your back
in broken ridges: a storm drain.

VI
Children chalk up pistols,
water bullets waiting on
pinchos. Their open mouths
are the sun that melts cherry
icees for one quarter.

VII
Empty chip bags and tiny plastic
baggies are embraced by dirt,
snuggled in your hug, a fertilizer
made with the richness of our blood.

VIII
Sneakers spin on your line
lynched like a weathervane
and you wear them like a
beautiful necklace.

IX
A cat’s last breath is stolen
on your doorsteps, cracks
and potholes filled with
flattened bodies.

X
I can carbon date silhouettes
of the dead layered in chalk
reading as far back
as anyone remembers.

XI
People pick you piece by piece
for every funeral you’ve curated.

XII
In the morning someone cracks
you open like a walnut; you
spill out and cover us with
the color of living.
XIII
Ways to meditate: eat
and drink your asphalt: worship
the fumes of gods from spray cans:
learn to love the way we love
in street corner stupor.

XIV
Fill in the gaps of you
with the memory of me.
Papi Pichón

Papi Pichón flies out of my library book and no one hears him because he chirps at spanish-to-english dictionary speed. all dismiss Papi’s beautiful wings a sabre, a grindstone attached to his gold plated breasts, a picture of many beers emptied across a flag on the wingspan of a flying rat.

sin vergüenza, he fluffs his feathers and juts his pecker at an unknown roost slurring, mira! mira! I got your stereotypical Boricua right here! pointing to its pigeon butt.

if he had a crack it’d be the faultline where carpetbaggers meet the campo. the winning lotto ticket my grandmother never scratched flutters out of the same book and Papi Pichón gobbles it up. It’s been a long time since we’ve seen real gold that is not the deceiving foil of a Publisher’s Clearing House sold dream. it’s been longer since the Puerto Rican was as smart as Cuban. since coplas, décimas, y bombas fetishized Borinquen reinas and creole babies. show me royalty, Father Pigeon before you go up in flames.

before you are burnt ash buried underneath more history where Ricky Martin, JLO and others sit on your pile of dust because you can still sing louder. fly me to the antiquity that collected the dusts of gold for your angels in Ponce harvesting coca to make our heartbeats beat faster than our feet
stepping to the conga in Newark. Papi Pichón
wants me to follow him past Oscar López Rivera
during the puerto rican day parade. before commonwealth
and the Bronx burnings. When we squawked like
coquis. before colorless. before oro. before
our sea of tierra learned to speak Spanish.
Quota

a cop car pulls up / colored in assumption / asks
if my keys open my car door / I work on his
lips / speaking to dispatch / in english / I’m
questioned in spanish / estoy terminando esta
ventana / my responses are broken / imagining
my accent / coming through the holes / of his
walkie like static / cocked on his vest / I was working
without license / and I was no mechanic / Siii officer,
yo sé / you can’t communicate / when your face is
cubism / hay street cleaning mañana / your mouth old
news / a window’s motor sputters / talking it out / eyes
for hands see when we do / law abiding / it becomes
image too / an artform of working for / who / through
windows you wish were bulletproof / no hay aceite
en el suelo / a man with shards of glass / for teeth / sees
no reflection / just a job / a pointed gun growing out
of a police hip pointing pressed crystal into your back
Fire-setting

only we would remember I was spawned
out of that house / through hollow core
door / a wet toddler palm print / still yolked
across its surface / cleaning hands won't
make sense of rubbish / like we made sense of
sepia / in old spanish Westerns / our eyes smiling /
against daylight’s glares on a tube tv / and
we’d share a same dust / caught through slices
of bright deceiving grandpa’s curtains / nor
would the excavator trucks hear the echoes / of
Oscar d’ Leon calling and responding to
hissings of steam / grandpa’s iron clicking
when he stood it up / we only knew how to keep
tempo by brushes of brooms / by pounding Ajax
containers as we shook our hips / the smell of
diesel will overtake everything / soft-boiled
into an impressionable black / all that’d
be left / stale smells of fire / not the aroma of
breakfast / pan con mantequilla chunks spat
out my mouth / in grandpa’s second-hand
chairs / redwood / stale smell of fire / not
the aroma of dinner / Newports, beer,
ice cream, / steaks frying in Mojo Criollo / this
small house in Newark / once scorched
like a sun / wooden panelled guts / the color
of old trumpets / now rough in color / avocado
skin / and I will remember the room
where Sábado Gigante played saturday nights /
the blue light reflecting off
brown walls / off brown me / off brown him
and that world was burned / to be scraped
clean by hired hands / that won’t know which
closets had kept towels / or power tools / my
photographic memory / the last effigy of his
work shirts hanging in a closet / the last house
to call him renter / and I called him up /
“Grandpa, your old house is gone.”
Our Daily Becoming
after Adam Clay

Like the same Mayagüez rock my grandfather moves from one side of his house to the other, it should be easier to distinguish inhales between exhales, the hands that rebuild his mother’s house, quenepas spawning overnight life in green.

In these moments of living, proof of flesh serves as a halo, the shape of the cheapest bean that feeds our daily becoming.

It should be easier to define one’s path to the winning lottery ticket, but dreams at his feet only reflect the chasing of beads around the rosary. Eventually, he stops running even if he misses it. O, how it felt like flying he says. How he now flaps his fingers filled with nourishing fruit while respecting the movement of rocks. Despite that he says, finalmente, los pichones le robarán el aire, he will continue to respect grass in his yard as the blades always reach towards the sun.
Witch’s Brew

in the kitchen / she pours them coffee / he washes out
the cloth filter / their metabolism pulls them back forty
five years / cooked in their first apartment / he had been
a spoon standing in boiling water / since origin / skimming
in a field of GOYA / standing erect as a flag on land
that was boiling beneath him / their bruises hidden
underneath bronze and grease / only half exposed
when she polished their aluminum / his voice steel wool
buried under the gravel of alcohol / expelling quantities
of bastards down at the factory / at the store / at the bank /
cursing those buildings that cursed their family / when
they were angry / his lips remained raisined / an asshole
where shit spewed / her lips remained ripe / a water
tomato still nineteen days old / thrown against the wall
or eaten in several bites / once she suppressed a beautiful
witch that used to live inside her / knocking at her skull / she
would want to show up / to stir rice in a cauldron / longing to
conjure a caldero off its black soldered grate / to toss it out
the window / still in her nighty / over the left shoulder / will
bring back her night-school / and take away her husband / and
kids / but till this day / she tells the bruja no / for in every back
and forth of scraping metal / the best pot of arroz is for the hungry
in her eyes / grains of rice offered to fit between the grit of our teeth.
Man Made Stone

¿De dónde vienes?

¿Quién es su creador?

In what language are you man
   prone en la esquina de un roca?

   Statuesque, made of lime.
   A man in man’s importance
      chiseled into a forever.

   Forgive me for the disrespect,
   my face is not clean enough
      for your viewing

   / though this gallery is public /

I cannot read Latin nonetheless I kneel
   to peruse an alphabet beneath your feet:

   Here is a man who did good and we loved him. Be him.

Those are many of my wishes as I am but a man
   talking to a statue
      who listens to me
         without working eardrums.

Does he wish there were words
   scored into my body
      so he could understand me
When the World Was Flat

Grandma speaks of Papi Pichón as a placeholder when we can’t see Jesus. He’s a proud understudy. She says that because of him, pigeons no longer suffer on earth. That this is their heaven. Every crust of bread they get is for gratis, no family first card embarrassment.

They are humble. He punches train tickets with his own talons. A pigeon’s wings are a timestamp that assured them when the world was flat. Where flapping to the end of earth’s margin held no fear of falling away from existence. Papi Pichón doesn’t remember how he began to fly he simply was—

a squirt, who became bird, who became journey. To spread an avian seed. To live long and multiply.
Meat Clerk

My job is to unpack boxes of pre-frozen meats & fish. I got one apron, one box cutter, and three replacement blades. I was told to buy my uniform before I started my first day. The uniform is a black polo shirt, black jeans, & slip resistant shoes. I bought two polos— only one pair of jeans.

Raul trains me for garbage duty. My new polo gets stained with the excretions of many dead animals bleeding onto our aprons. He was the newest clerk in the department before I showed up and he used to stand on the inside of this metal channel between the loading dock and dumpster. Now this passage is mine. You get used to the smell. He says this while passing me the dead from an oranged tub cart. I learn to scrub the slop chute as he gives me directions from a sanitized distance.

Black jeans fading into tar, they have a rip in the front left pocket from my box cutter that teases my thigh, it keeps incising larger. I count box number 32 of frozen tilapias, speaking fish to farm-raised frozen fillets. My blade pokes fun at shoppers, people who walk by me, a Latino with a blade. In this space I appear to them unthreatening, and they’re unafraid to ask me, where are the thick cut steaks? And I say, We only have thin and they say, I’ll go across the street to the Walmart. To another store where they will ask me, Do you work here? and I will reply, no.

Near closing time my wrist gets caught between two u-boats. My watch breaks and the last recorded time between plastic, meat, & steel was 9:50 PM. I can’t leave until I’m finished with them and the Tim the supervisor knows each u-boat takes fifteen minutes. I hide the last u-boat behind a pallet of soda crackers for tomorrow.

Passing me some grapes clipped from the produce backroom, Doña Maria says she has seen this supermarket change names four times different times. I worry for her. The dairy freezer birthed her permanent cold, it pained her sixty-five year old bones so I helped her stack the crates of milk putting each gallon on a shelf in rhythm with her coughs and sniffles. It’s
common knowledge that each gallon weighs about eight pounds and there are four in a milk crate. When Maria was hired she only left one box unchecked on her application:

☐ Can you lift more than 20lbs?

Before punching out on a Friday night I see chicken on clearance. It expires after closing. The water has dried and Tim supervisor taught me poultry is supposed to be pink. Its yellow. Shoplifted with my dignity, I take it while noone is looking.

When I’m walking home don’t hit me crossing the street, 9-1-1 takes 25 minutes too long around here and I’ll miss the last bus. At my apartment I check my pay stub and it isn’t enough to pay rent. This is what I work for.
Cuco

who or what takes out the trash / for he consumes neglect in three course meals /

children kidnapped in garbage bags / totem poled around this city /

what is their crying but the color of his face / living inside everybody who left what used to be home / in his swagger, the absence of graciousness / bones in the mouth of a stray / neglected scraps of Crown Fried Chicken / time is only measured in snow / shooting up bad behavior like crystalline needles / liquid heat to fibrous tissue / muscle made metal in heat / clipped to hips at intersections / parents bark his name to progeny / attempting to keep darkness out of a child’s face / because darkness is his area code / he is the unzipping of jeans / the sounds of snapping twigs inside a firearm’s chamber / he is real every time another is lost to these streets / he is real because children.
Pegao

Did you hear Did you see Have you seen Did you know

Four apartments the store the restaurant and bar
the typically happy place

Cuatro apartamentos La bodega El Bachatipico
a mound of rubble a mound of rice fell asleep while cooking
El bachatipico was closed

Oil left in the frying pans fell asleep while cooking aceite
dormido en el caldero waiting to be lit

Did you hear alarms

The alarms sounding like the trucks
the alarms sounding like the people

Did you see el fuego

the lighting of the stove
the street corner a stove
Cuatro familias

a mound of rice turned with a spoon
like matchsticks
like pegao among the short grains

Have you seen

a flame retardant mattress,
folded under rubble.

The untouched pink princess plastics an easy bake oven
el horno on HIGH

Empty gallons of oil
refrigerators ashes of arroz sliced bread milk
lit cigarettes lotto tickets
the many plastic cubbies at the front of the store that held it all together

Did you hear
the four apartments
crashing

Did you see
El Bachatipico
the mounds of rice burnt black

Have you seen
her easy bake oven
the still-intact mattresses

Did you know
the dusty storefront mats
the bacardi dancefloors
the people
the fire

yes.
Coffee, Steeped in Morning

One tall cup of man. Jamaica Blue Mountain
yelling in slacks and a rolex catching the 6:45AM sun.

The other bubbling machismo and Bustelo in work boots
and carpenter jeans. The men began speaking bitter words
to each other, fighting over a woman who was playing them
both. The most ridiculous display of courtship. They yelled
at each other but the person to blame was she who had brewed them
taking money from both knowing most connoisseurs like their coffee
light so she blew her nose to call her mucus creamer and made them
fight for it. They were yelling and waving their fists, screaming
street names and you know who I am’s.
They were taste testing each other's toughness with shoves
until Jamaica delivered Bustelo a blow.
I wanted them to feel the pain of

a cotton gin piercing their palms / scabbed dirt corroborating
beneath their nails / indentured servitude / cold hosings / the
bites of dogs / the crackings of clubs to skulls / of whips to
backs / and respiratory cancer from agent orange in tomato
fields / and lesions from nuclear plants / and dermatitis scabs
from household chemicals / and lung disease from gas station
pumps / and scoliosis from hard labor / to feel miseducation to
feel rebellion and their mothers singing gospels and folk songs
on their backs /

But they were too busy trying to punch each other's lights out
for a woman who didn’t exist.

And even if she did, this fight wasn’t a poem.
Headstone

For Britney

Here lies a stampede birthed out of a single smokestack made of many clouds and hamburger meat marching on an empty stomach flavored marshmallow. Twelve years old—hands brandished ashy because a railing was held too tight. A busted lip in a school photo. The sensation of a cracked mouth feeling like a scab bitten off the bottom lip. How does it feel to miss missing when one feels never missed? I never read your letters though now I wish I could. Everything lavender. The fudge stripes still in a dresser. Notes under an antiseptic bed make a letter signed to myself. Aside the pages popcorning fingers around bitten nails. Cupcakes on pajama pants, stamped puppies on a polo. Leopards stealthling in cemetery brush in stained glass. Don’t look in mirrors. You will see the reflection of your tombstone. The mortician said pressure and space between your molars made polished granite. Braces are the railroad tracks never reaching their final stop. The conductor calling—Johnson & Johnson’s bubbling in a tub. Smells like sweet tarts. No tears for faucet. No tears for drain stopper. No tears for you are waiting to meet me where here lies.
Heartlines

When she was young Mamá was a dancer at the Tropicana. Their family never had juice, Mamá never had money, but they squeezed the living life out of sweat to make sangria. Boy asked her how to live, she said drop out of school before you can count. Boy asked her how the bills were paid, her answer was necessity. Then, boy asked her how to cook.

She said, you need to start young and hungry in the Bronx. At least 4 people living in 400 square feet measure the right heapings of sofrito. You need to be 3 children left alone, running inside with the burners turned on HIGH. How not to burn white rice is how to count each other’s blisters. Turning down the fire only when bubbles begin to pop.

Boy was an adult but still too young to feel. He questioned how her mother’s tongue never died despite overwatering. He asked about the beauty mark on her neck that scared him as a child when he thought it grew back at every pull. Boy questioned grandma’s smell, rosewater and carnations. She said it was the perfume of her body: a four course meal infused with inhaled chemicals, four decades of housekeeping. She put her hands over boy’s eyes. Asked him to endure the warmth of unplanned nose bleeds from toilet bleach and Pine-Sol. Detect pain in the knees by slipping on tiles she cleaned. Boy asked grandma how to build a family, she showed him her hands to cover boy’s eyes, to feel her heartlines of grease, the gunk of red sazón inscribed under chipped nails under arthritis. She locked herself in a closet for hours and upon returning let out a noise habitually silent. Boy hugged her once for every meal, wiped the scar tissue off her wrinkled cheeks.
For Armando

I told the brother gracias for coming to me in his best Spanish. Yes, yes my eyes were a little wet.

I assumed Jehovah witnessed them through tinted lenses and pushed the hermano towards me.

He called himself Armando. His corduroys faded into a bathroom mortar blue.

They didn’t reflect his posture, nor his strong grip. His boisterousness in saying, explicame esto.

The neatness of his mustache made him every abuelo. We spoke in spanglish, he recited his best verses, calling them all poems. His words became tears and his words poured into me. What our worlds couldn’t connect

our lenguajes did in spirit. And I drank his scripture that quenched an unknown thirst.
A Feather on the Puerto Rican Obituary While Watching a Charlie Brown Christmas

On the dim and glow of this new world Papi Píchón is an afflatus of the alphabet. On the stamp of every newsprint he is the glue that shits on consonant blends. On page 6, a convenience store is robbed and every Caribbean grandmother on the block (including my own) reports the crime to to 9-1-1 as a burgery.

Upon opening the second page there is another plume dividing the deaths of Juan, Miguel, Jennifer, Jayden, and Jennifer. I read their causes of death and they leave behind their mastercards— the ink still wet at the end of a check. They will die again tomorrow, these perfect characters having their profiles nailed to the doors of each letter’s serif. Grouped into words they are the last whispers of dead names they echo. Their services will be held on the thresholds of a culture so I pluck this feather out of an entire sheaf. I’ll purposely prick my finger on the slightest tip of a page. This piece of wing will bookmark the Funnies, a calamus filled whole with Christmas to draw in the music of Linus and Lucy. Their saddest song covers the deceased with Linus’ single blanket.
Baseball As Compass

can not keep the bench warm

it was pure chagrin / eye black / asserting itself
at tips of still-maturing cheekbones / sweat

beads of salt snaking down a young stubble / it
was the sport of my father’s family not mine /

a bat the color of cigar paper / dug out
of a small wooden box / a Yankees ball cap

on every coat rack / they were as much
of the MLB as I wasn’t Cuban / as much

I was my mother’s child / mom never played
sports because grandma never played sports / home

plate was my favorite / the one she cooked at six / until
I was twelve in the kitchen / I ate two pork chops

before trick or treating / I was a football player that year /
when kids on my street heckled

at the Giants jersey Dodgers bottoms homemade
costume / baseball took grandpa back to childhood dreams

on the island / on the west tip / where he didn’t know
baseball already found him / in a formation of moth balls

going out to play / grandpa and his brothers / scuttling out
of their concrete shack / to cut the mountains of clothes

growing in their east / where they learned that whites

liked the soak of bleach / grandpa’s Papi taught them
to find perfect rocks / & the art of slamming stone
against troughs of color / grandpa named himself

“the closer” of dry cleaning / working the swing of
his arm / into pigment / though he was only destined
to watch other kids / he wished to be on that field
too / peeking through a galvanized fence / jealous of

his adolescent shoulder / never flexing the complicated
musculature of a similar pattern / printed onto the clothes

he ruined thinking of his fastball / I knew I didn’t
like baseball because it showed me unworthy / to make it

my life / the way grandpa compared baseball
to clothes / to people / how I’d mistaken

a single tear down his cheek / for a bead of painful
sweat / when he tells me forty five years after leaving /

to remember that
one group bleeds and the other bleaches.

in his kitchen sink / white shirts and linen soaked
with bleach / he says this same phrase / again /

and again / in his best spaghetti western / wisdom
only known while washing my batting gloves

for the third season / fighting the same stain out
while piles of other clothes wait
on the floor / dirty in a milk crate.
Men’s Cubavera Embroidered XL

How I wish my silk shirt was a guayabera
short sleeved and woven loose so the air
could breathe through. How a guayabera
has the power to make people wonder

about limbs underneath flowy sleeves,
forearms that rests on the waist of

a lover, that embraces family, carries boxes,
the implications of hard working biceps

smuggled beneath linen. Muy macho. Yes,
strong limbs with the tattoos of diaspora

hemmed through pockets over the heart.
How I wish that guayabera on the rack

would turn any suncup into a piña colada,
shake my Tropicana carton into a Mojito,

instantaneously equipping it with an umbrella
like the one I’d sit under wearing this particular

guayabera. On the basis of customary fashion,
allow me cotton, to humbly, publicly leave my shirt

unbuttoned more than usual. The craftsman
ship of the threading magically making my chest

more island lush in vegetation and less
grounded meat on a platter. How I wish

the guayabera was my uniform, a shirt physically
breathing. If my face is caught burning red so be it.

I want the Caribbean stamp of approval. I long to
talk with the ghosts of Tainos and the Motherland.

I touch the shoulders to hear croaks battle cackles
inside el yunque. I run my hands down the seams
to feel the howlings from machines that make these
$70 copies. In the middle of a department store

I put on the guayabera to witness myself getting
backhanded in the mirror by my ancestors

for being swindled. Purchasing the most
expensive kind of farmers clothes. I follow

the numbered footsteps of dance charts filling
    in the shoes of history right out the door of Macy’s.

Just right. In my new guayabera.
    Each step counting the money I’ve spent:
        1, 2, 3 ... 5, 6, 7
        1, 2, 3 ... 5, 6, 7
        1, 2, 3 ... 5, 6, 7
        1, 2, 3 ... 5, 6, 7
When the World Was Flat

Papi Pichón’s trills are exhaust fumes.
He never had his baptism, he imagines
America as the chupacabra, sucking his
dried up flecks of blood through a straw
on a tourist’s t-shirt. Until the united states
of larva grows into hairy fleas his sugar
cubes of dirt wade in his oiled feathers,
a crude refinery. Papi Pichón cuts down
shoes hanging from telephone wires.
This is how he gets attention on street
corners if he is hungry. Perched on a utility pole,
he teaches Puerto Ricans to speak pichón—
ser como jamón del sandwich. He is lunch meat
between pressed cuban bread, the language
between two islands. Papi Pichón realized a larger
land mass worships him. Otherwise he would have
never flown up the east coast. His body is a building,

his flapping creates social clubs that sing his name
through alcohol, dominos, and bochinche. He is an
American Airlines of culture. Papi Pichón is certain
he has found a permanent place of loiter,
to be impressed by the bass in his own voice coming
in through a church’s loudspeaker. And he understands
Spanglish as the cooings of two lovemaking pigeons.
He creates dove. It is how he knows existing is conquering.
Mother Botánica

Ay que los tres clavos de la cruz
Vayan delante de mi'
Que le hablen y le respondan
Ay dios tu ve
al que me critique a mi'
Yo tengo aguanile mai mai
- Aguanile

Morphed 99cents of sliced bread into dough balls for breakfast. Saturday morning. Very early. No butter, no mayo, just filled with my daily bread. Going to the botánica on a half empty stomach to fill your self on sweat guised in tears of Me. I am no air conditioner. I’m heat and murmur. I am this world but you are not your island. I am what I bring to you, sage when you enter me, the ding at the storefront, vibrations and shakers. Greeting in the language of your grandma’s swollen feet. Walk into me, son. I am her agua, nile river rich. Espiritismo disguised in Hongosan and Alcoholado, my people come here by the baskets. Your friends— they
search me with their grandma’s and when your abuela dies I will be here for you, too.
The Dancer

Make her spin with your
scratches. Continue
to hit congas at the front of
the entrance at El Coqui.

Say nightshade in her hands,
say she can provide me no aid.

In Jersey, Nueva York, Puerto
Rico—this dancer floods cities
in the threnody of her hips.
Her movements in circles
on hands and knees, men
growing and toppling
like banana trees. We don’t dare
be caught in her eye.

To be hostage to her hurricane
sweeping fear in every man’s heart.

Let her continue to cut the air
of this dancefloor with her hips
in a whirlwind of sex
that will leave this club ravaged.
Hebdomadal Communion

The barber peaced me up. I asked him for Aventura, he said this place serviced history, no adventure without cleansing. We talked sports and more music and I wondered if he should fade my temples into a one, two, or three, or cut me close enough to call my crown Brooklyn. I’m not a Puerto Rican from Brooklyn, but sitting in the same chair gets me closer every week. I see a new reflection. Between the framed rooster and flag, another framed pair of boxing gloves. Another man’s hands framed on the wall next to Jesus with his hands. The same pinned icon joins to gather the beads on my neck. Nailed to this chair my hair is a simple sacrifice. To grant another man’s hands permission to feel is a straight razor.
to my temple. Resisting a resistance for the sake of beauty. The madness crafted in the beatitude of a shape-up to match a trimmed brow. For $12 a week, I can watch my hair revive itself, unruly. In three days I will covet next friday, to be born again, fresh to death. To watch heavy clippers in a hand and feel them quake on my crown. To almost feel the earth tremble.
Spin Cycle

wednesday morning / school children / playing hookie
with their mother’s permission / it’s 99cents for a wash /
mothers and their mothers / will be here all day / watching
Mickey Mouse Clubhouse / cable / for free / on three tv
screens / english / spanish / & closed captions / are how
the cows do the can-can / a duck and mouse in dresses /
mothers and their mothers / can’t afford to pay full price
while the lavanderas fold towels / kids ducking under and
over laundry baskets / hiding in special hiding spots / out of
reach from anyone / over 36 inches / still in range of Mickey’s
oh boy! / and Capri Sun commercials / lavanderas stocking
Fabuloso / madres making math out of machinas / stuffing
five cubic feet of clothes into basins that suggest four / this
temple is teaching / heat / recitation of plagal chants from
the quaking spin of baskets / washerwomen watching machines
mothers watching children / como mass / soft hums in the
flat screens / cleanliness / teaching kids / how to be clean /
as animals / bleach teaches godliness / a question / what happens
when the Clubhouse is closed for business / and the laundromat
stays open / when children figure out they are animals / that do
cleaning / and what will they do when there is no emotion /
when washers keep spinning / on their farm / and they are their
own workers / that keep working / and a truth keeps preaching
and folding / pressed with steam in the morning / worth 99cents.
On Development

It's on fire out there & I don’t feel like writing poetry. There’s so many people. I’m speaking to my
self more than usual. I’m sweating in this borrowed office with the window closed & the A/C on. I’m not reading,
I’m simply pretending. When you look out my window do you see any of this getting better? Don’t tell me
the buildings are erecting themselves larger, or the city’s floors got themselves polished enough to eat off of.
The sign says you can eat here if you could afford a plate & they just got rid of poverty last night now I’ve been demoted.
Problems don’t go away, just simply shuffled around now it’s just me surrounded by a bunch of different you’s.
Am I still sick for disliking progress? I enjoy the love but it’s like my nostrils barely skim the surface in an audience of me.
I’m pruning skin in a bathtub. In a streetsmart bathbomb solution. I have two hands, one to paddle and another that paints
the red and white stripes on my face. I’m a blue canvas with a star over my eye singing Que bonita Bandera.
& I bring others with me because my mother told me to but on the inside I fear their weight is too much
for me when I try to cross the river: the city tied around my ankles.
last week Crazy was six foot six of mumbling and fist-fighting. Crazy lost its footing on the bus and toppled sideways never spilling its beer. Crazy jumped on railroad tracks in the rain with the train coming and balanced the steel like an imp. yesterday I saw Crazy. it was five foot five and spoke to Crazy in windows pausing for stoplights. Crazy tightroped double yellow lines on main avenues spitting at delivery trucks. Crazy collects change in a bag of Fritos because I’m sure money tastes good when Crazy could get it. Crazy pisses in a storm drain and makes a wish: that heroin wasn’t the name for the crater in its stomach. dope sticks to the gut better than food. Crazy picks flowers too roughly. Crazy scrubs its body with Ajax but sin can’t rub off. Crazy has the crown of an owl. Crazy is no more than a foot tall today. Crazy chirps outside— mourning doves make beautiful sounds, and it’s still raining
and Crazy is still poking
at my trash, looking
for evidence of itself
in there. Before the block
got’em hooked. someone
should tell Crazy the waste
bin is bottomless.
Wildflower

He grew from different gashes in concrete always covered in dirt. No one named him he’s nondescript he’s evergreen weather never killed him. He was a piece of sidewalk sprouted immobile and cracked from dust on windy mornings.

He thought standing still would draw others to his wilting.

No one helps but sometimes they fed him his twiggy branches scratched to pieces by bugs burrowing the broken bark invasive eczema arms animated in surrender

and he hated them all.

He was an angry preacher crying nectar he couldn’t bear the beating of his sermon where the sun showed him too clearly screaming as a kind of release.

He’d continue to germinate on street corners continue to starve on what didn’t matter, flitting in the wind his epilepsy a body spliced between itself and the world that dropped him only once—

that time he tongued the ground with his teeth and mixed blood with dust.

He cried and no one ever heard him because you can’t see a flower dying in a meadow.
Precious Moments

On every counter and beside the entertainment center,
space is claimed by the little wings plucking at harps
and trumpets leading an unknown charge of credit cards.

Boy knows heaven and its angels live in his home
and he doesn’t collect their rent.
Instead he cleans the faces of angels to be
closer to figuras. To steal their breath and
simulate their worth.

Every Sunday he wipes down bookshelf altars
asking the white candle for permission.

When lit, boy anoints their feet to be
reminded of words not often uttered.

They speak in minimalism, this is their design
casting shadows on grandma’s upper lip.

He thinks himself into creationism:
from-factory, to-store, to-purse, to-home.

She will always swallow pennies like pills,
counting them all in the bank account of her belly
so boy answers to these tchotchkes
because angels breed more angels.

Boy reimagines her prized figurine from first communion
with its beady cherubim eye
a lure, the circumferencing growth
of a thrift store
a halogen light shining on more porcelain dust collectors.

And he thought he heard it say, *she made me once*
or
*she is one of us.*
Spray Cans Like Bread

Love
tagged on the ghetto
grottoes of closed stores
   on main avenues.

When the doors of businesses shut
the church outside the churches
   restore session.

Out walk the poets and artists
to write our fables
   on the sides of buildings.

A congregation sauntering
after dark,
   shows up with hands
to mark temples until printed noun.

Letters on the text
   books of walls
spelling out
   mythical streets.

These are the lowly carpenters
of mural and bodega.

Index fingers bent
like the hugging of a trigger
   pressing nozzles down
to reach a consecration.

Empty vessels with the pressures of
   color.

Existing for a world
on the insides of precious—

*how He is us* they ask

in each graffiti

making houses

out of stories

from the bottoms

of three dollar

aluminum miracles.

Spray cans like bread.

Their love for bibles

scripted into bubbles.
Baptism

In a factory where its flood zone ruined my grandfather’s third 93’ Toyota / in a flood zoned factory / workers called him Papa Dios / every storm was a fight for his belongings / this time his wallet / swimming in the Passaic River / a school picture of him self / water up to his neck / cut, stitch, press, package / cut, stitch, press, package / 60,000 folds in an hour / 20,000 packages sealed a day / he didn’t worry about numbers as long as his job was only to walk / walk / walk / on water / heaping shopping carts of linen back and forth / he agreed to do this job when he signed the liability with / 18 year old fingers / like papaya slices / musky water / he dropped the paper from fear / from moving out of tía’s cramped Manhattan studio / from promise / from finally escaping slum / never to wade through blackwater again / unless he said he would / as on this day / floating like paper / like the city around him / in another world again he / finds himself reaching / for what makes them all utter hombre / when he walks into work / the next morning / still wet / one more day older / the picture still in his hand / the car still swimming.