

## MARTÍN ESPADA

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### Public School 190, Brooklyn 1963

The inkwells had no ink.  
The flag had 48 stars, four years  
after Alaska and Hawaii.  
There were vandalized blackboards  
and chairs with three legs,  
taped windows, retarded boys penned  
in the basement.  
Some of us stared in Spanish.  
We windmilled punches  
or hid in the closet to steal from coats  
as the teacher drowsed, head bobbing.  
We had the Dick and Jane books,  
but someone filled in their faces  
with a brown crayon.

When Kennedy was shot,  
they hurried us onto buses,  
not saying why,  
saying only that  
something bad had happened.  
But we knew  
something bad had happened,  
knew that before  
November 22, 1963.

## Soliloquy At Gunpoint

I sat in the car,  
window down in summer,  
waiting. Two boys  
from the neighborhood  
peered in the car  
and did not recognize me,  
so one opened his gym bag  
and flourished a revolver  
with black tape on the handle,  
brushing the barrel's tiny mouth  
against my forehead.

I sat calm as a burning monk.  
The only god in my meditation  
was the one who splices the ribbon of film:  
a screen full of gunmen with sleepwalker's gaze,  
confident detectives in silk neckties,  
the cooing of hostage negotiators,  
soliloquy at gunpoint  
recited without stuttering.

I spread my hand  
as if to offer salt  
to a licking dog.  
The script said, "Give me the gun,"  
so I said, "Give me the gun."  
And he did.

## Offerings To An Ulcerated God

– Chelsea, Massachusetts

“Mrs. López refuses to pay rent,  
and we want her out,”  
the landlord’s lawyer said,  
tugging at his law school ring.  
The judge called for an interpreter,  
but all the interpreters were gone,  
trafficking in Spanish  
at the criminal session  
on the second floor.

A volunteer stood up in the gallery.  
Mrs. López showed the interpreter  
a poker hand of snapshots,  
the rat curled in a glue trap  
next to the refrigerator,  
the water frozen in the toilet,  
a door without a doorknob  
(No rent for this. I know the law  
and I want to speak,  
she whispered to the interpreter).

“Tell her she has to pay  
and she has ten days to get out,”  
the judge commanded, rose  
so the rest of the courtroom rose  
and left the bench. Suddenly  
the courtroom clattered  
with the end of business:

the clerk of the court  
gathered her files  
and the bailiff went to lunch.  
Mrs. López stood before the bench,  
still holding up her fan of snapshots  
like an offering this ulcerated god  
refused to taste,  
while the interpreter  
felt the burning  
bubble in his throat  
as he slowly turned to face her.

## **The Prisoners Of Saint Lawrence**

– Riverview Correctional Facility,  
Ogdensburg, New York, 1993

Snow astonishing their hammered faces,  
the prisoners of Saint Lawrence, island men,  
remember in Spanish the island places.

The Saint Lawrence River churns white into Canada, races  
past barbed walls. Immigrants from a dark sea find oceanic  
snow astonishing. Their hammered faces.

harden in city jails and courthouses, indigent cases  
telling translators, public defenders what they  
remember in Spanish. The island places,

banana leaf and nervous chickens, graces  
gone in this amnesia of snow, stinging cocaine  
snow, astonishing their hammered faces.

There is snow in the silence of the visiting rooms, spaces  
like snow in the paper of their poems and letters, that  
remember in Spanish the island places.

So the law speaks of cocaine, grams and traces,  
as the prisoners of Saint Lawrence, island men,  
snow astonishing their hammered faces,  
remember in Spanish the island places.

## **Sing In The Voice Of A God Even Atheists Can Hear**

– for Demetria Martinez  
Albuquerque, New Mexico,  
August 1988

The prosecutor spoke “conspiracy”  
as if Demetria were a mercenary  
trading in helicopter gunships,  
not the poet with a reporter’s notebook.  
The prosecutor spoke “smuggling”  
as if two pregnant refugees  
were bundles of heroin,  
not fleeing a war of slit bellies.  
The prosecutor spoke “illegal aliens”  
as if El Salvador were a planet  
of brown creatures with antennae,  
not mestiza women dividing in birth.  
The prosecutor spoke of conspiracy  
to smuggle illegal aliens,  
indicting the poet with a poem,  
her poem for two women of El Salvador,  
traveling with them by way of Juárez,  
evidence abducted from her desk.

So Demetria, accused, stood in the meandering  
patient line of all the accused:  
accused of ducking searchlights and gunshots  
on the border, crossing the river  
to steal televisions from sleeping suburban dens;  
accused of mopping in slow lazy rings  
or letting meat burn in the spitting grease;

accused of bruising the fruit with bruised hands  
picking for so many nickels paid on the bucket;  
accused of the bristling knives and needles,  
the slash and puncture of the tattooed arm;  
accused of leering with an accent  
at the cheerleaders of private high schools;  
accused of causing ear infections  
by jabbering en español at the bar,  
or pangs in the teeth of those  
who mispronounce their names;

accused of skin so brown their brains must shrink  
with every promiscuous generation;  
accused of kissing the welfare check twice a month  
so the man with a pickup truck paying taxes  
can never buy a boat;  
accused of conquering territory in potter's field,  
crowding cemeteries with crosses  
like commuters on the subway at rush hour.

But the dead, those dead exhausted  
by the drumroll of accusation,  
heard the indictment of Demetria.  
They knew she walked at the elbow of pariahs,  
quietly singing sanctuary. So the dead opened their mouths  
and began to sing, not the soprano of choirs glowing white,  
but the rough-throated song of people at work  
or pause from work in barrios and fields,  
the heart-attack seamstress, the lettuce picker in pesticide fog,  
the boy who painted murals before the bullet.  
In México, her peasant ancestors  
sang the corrido of Demetria the Renegade to Zapata's troops.  
In El Salvador, the dead with amputated tongues  
could suddenly sing, their music floating like steam.  
Together they would sing in the voice of a god  
even atheists can hear, even a jury across the border.

And the poet was free.

## **Tires Stacked In The Hallways Of Civilization**

– Chelsea, Massachusetts

“Yes, Your Honor, there are rodents,”  
said the landlord to the judge,  
“but I let the tenant  
have a cat. Besides,  
he stacks his tires  
in the hallway.”

The tenant confessed  
in stuttering English:  
“Yes, Your Honor,  
I am from El Salvador,  
and I put my tires  
in the hallway.”

The judge puffed up  
his robes  
like a black bird  
shaking off rain:  
“Tires out of the hallway!  
You don’t live in a jungle  
anymore. This is a civilized country.”

So the defendant was ordered  
to remove his tires  
from the hallways of civilization,  
and allowed to keep the cat.

## **DSS Dream**

I dreamed  
the Department of Social Services  
came to the door and said:  
“We understand  
you have a baby,  
a goat, and a pig living here  
in a two-room apartment.  
This is illegal.  
We have to take the baby away,  
unless you eat the goat.”

The pig’s OK?” I asked.  
“The pig’s OK,” they said.