

Martín Espada

Castles for The Laborers and Ballgames on the Radio

For Howard Zinn (1922-2010)

We stood together at the top of his icy steps, without a word for once, squinting at the hill below and the tumble we were about to take, heads bumping on every step till our bodies rolled into the street. He was older than the bread lines of the Great Depression. Before the War he labored at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, even organized apprentices, but now there was ice. I outweighed him by a hundred pounds; when my feet began to skid, I would land on him and hear the crunch of his surgically repaired spine. The books I held for him would fly away like doves disobeying an amateur magician.

Let's go back in the house, I said. Show me the baseball Sandy Koufax signed to you: "from one lefty to another." Instead, he picked up a blue plastic bucket of sand, the kind of pail good for building castles at Coney Island, tossed a fist of sand down onto the sun-frozen concrete and took the first step, delicately. Again and again, he would throw a handful of sand in the air like bread for pigeons, then probe with the tip of his shoe for the sandy place on the next step: sand, then step; sand, then step. Every time he took a step I took a step, an apprentice shadow studying the movements of his teacher the body. This is how I came to dance a soft-shoe in size fourteen boots, grinding my toes into the gritty spots he left behind on the ice. I was there:

I saw him turn the tundra into the beach with a wave of his hand, Coney Island of castles for the laborers and ballgames on the radio, showing the way across the ice and down the hill into the street, where he spoke to me the last words of the last lesson: *You drive.*