

Martín Espada

El Moriviví

For Frank Espada (1930-2014)

The Spanish means: *I died, I lived*. In Puerto Rico, the leaves of el moriviví close in the dark and open at first light.

The fronds curl at a finger's touch and then unfurl again.

My father, a mountain born of mountains, the tallest Puerto Rican in New York, who scraped doorways, who could crack the walls with the rumble of his voice, kept a moriviví growing in his ribs. He would die, then live.

My father spoke in the tongue of el moriviví, teaching me the parable of Joe Fleming, who screwed his lit cigarette into the arms of the spics he caught, flapping like fish.

My father was a bony boy, the nerves in his back crushed by the Aiello Coal and Ice Company, the load he lifted up too many flights of stairs. Three times they would meet to brawl for a crowd after school.

The first time, my father opened his eyes to gravel and the shoes of his enemy. The second time, he rose and dug his arm up to the elbow in the monster's belly, so badly did he want to tear out the heart and eat it.

The third time, Fleming did not show up, and the boys with cigarette burns clapped their spindly champion on the back, all the way down the street. Fleming would become a cop, fired for breaking bones in too many faces. He died smoking in bed, a sheet of flame up to his chin.

There was a moriviví sprouting in my father's chest. He would die, then live. He spat obscenities like sunflower seeds at the driver who told him to sit at the back of the bus in Mississippi, then slipped his cap over his eyes and fell asleep. He spent a week in jail, called it the best week of his life, strode through the jailhouse door and sat behind the driver of the bus on the way out of town, his Air Force uniform all that kept the noose from his neck. He would come to know the jailhouse again, among hundreds of demonstrators ferried by police to Hart Island on the East River, where the city of New York stacks the coffins of anonymous and stillborn bodies. Here, Confederate prisoners once wept for the Stars and Bars; now, the prisoners sang Freedom Songs.

The jailers outlawed phone calls, so we were sure my father must be a body like the bodies rolling waterlogged in the East River, till he came back from the island of the dead, black hair combed meticulously. When the riots burned in Brooklyn night after night, my father was a peacemaker on the corner with a megaphone. A fiery chunk of concrete fell from the sky and missed his head by inches. My mother would tell me: *Your father is out dodging bullets.* He spoke at a rally with Malcolm X, incantatory words billowing through the bundled crowd, lifting hands and faces. *Teach*, they cried. My father clicked a photograph of Malcolm as he bent to hear a question, finger pressed against the chin. Two months later the assassins stampeded the crowd to shoot Malcolm, blood leaping from his chest as he fell. My father would die too, but then he would live again, after every riot, every rally, every arrest, every night in jail, the change from his pockets landing hard on the dresser at 4 AM every time I swore he was gone for good.

My father knew the secrets of el moriviví, that he would die, then live. He drifted off at the wheel, drove into a guardrail, shook his head and walked away without a web of scars or fractures. He passed out from the heat in the subway, toppled onto the tracks, and somehow missed the third rail. He tied a white apron across his waist to open a grocery store, pulled a revolver from the counter to startle the gangsters demanding protection, then put up signs for a clearance sale as soon as they backed out the door with their hands in the air. When the family finally took a vacation in the mountains of the Hudson Valley, a hotel with waiters in white jackets and white paint peeling in the room, the roof exploded in flame, as if the ghost of Joe Fleming and his cigarette trailed us everywhere, and it was then that my father appeared in the smoke, like a general leading the charge in battle, shouting commands at the volunteer fire company, steering the water from the hoses, since he was immune to death by fire or water, as if he wore the crumbled leaves of el moriviví in an amulet slung around his neck.

My brother called to say el moriviví was gone. My father tore at the wires, the electrodes, the IV, saying that he wanted to go home. The hospital was a jailhouse in Mississippi. The furious pulse that fired his heart in every fight flooded

the chambers of his heart. The doctors scrutinized the film,
the grainy shadows and the light, but could never see: my father
was a moriviví. *I died. I lived.* He died. He lived. He dies. He lives.