

Martín Espada

Flan

For Jack Agüeros (1934-2014)

I was eight when the blackout struck and the lights died all across the city like a massacre of fireflies. In the projects of Brooklyn, I steered myself to 14F, fingers spread against the cool tiles of the hallway, past the concrete and chicken-wire terrace where I once burnt ants with a magnifying glass.

Many years later, at the Chinese restaurant uptown, Jack said: *They got any flan here?* He was my first poet. I had seen the fireflies in his sonnets blink and float away: Fulano the philosopher in the unemployment line; Blanco the painter, painting in the madhouse; Monterosa the dealer killed by shotgun in a bar on Avenue A; his mother the seamstress and the quick needle of her sewing machine; Jack the moving man, his hands sliced raw. He stacked his apartment with dictionaries in three languages. I knew the raconteur's grin with every tale: *Raúl Juliá is a friend of mine: a Puerto Rican playing Macbeth. He took 14 curtain calls on opening night.*

Maybe he would tell me now that flan was not Puerto Rican, or Mexican, or Spanish, but Chinese, invented by a trembling cook to satisfy the palate of an emperor in the Ming Dynasty. *No flan, Jack,* I said. *This is a Chinese restaurant.* Two minutes later, he said: *They got any flan?* I showed him the dog-eared and fingerprinted menu. *No flan,* I said. When the waiter unfurled his pad, Jack said to him: *You got flan?* He sang this song for an hour. The egg roll was not flan. The fried rice was not flan. The fortune cookie was not flan. *Can we get some flan?* he said. *Goddammit, Jack,* I said.

The poets crowded into the bar, striding to the mike. Jack stood with poem in hand, read the title, tilted his head and said it again, studied the page as if the words shriveled up like ants burnt under a magnifying glass, then sat down. I witnessed the massacre of fireflies. A few of us clapped, not knowing what to do with our hands, staring at the sonneteer who lost all his quatrains and couplets in the denim jacket he left on the subway, the words of Fulano still waiting on the unemployment line: *The faster you spin, the stiller you look. / There's something to learn in that, but what?*

After the diagnosis, I handed Jack a book of poems. He dangled the book upside down like a stiff mouse by the tail, something we would sniff behind the refrigerator. I wanted sonnets. Jack kept singing the chorus of a song: *Get me to the church. Get me to the church. Get me to the church on time.*

At the end, I leaned over Jack's bed to read his own poem in his ear, but some words come home after the blackout, fingers crawling on the wall. I know what I should have said at the Chinese restaurant: *Jack, let's get some flan.*

We should have braved the subway at rush hour, straphangers rocking all the way to 14th Street and 8th Avenue, to La Taza de Oro, gone now like Jack, for rice and beans, squid in its own ink, café con leche y flan, Jack: a spoonful of flan for you after all the years of sonnets and bread for me, the steam rising when your hands cracked the crust at the table.