

Martín Espada

Hard-Handed Men of Athens

Theseus: What are they that do play it?

Philostrate: Hard-handed men, that work in Athens here,

Which never labour'd in their minds till now.

—A Midsummer Night's Dream, Act V, Scene i

We are the hard-handed men of Athens, the rude Mechanicals:
the tailor, the weaver, the tinker, the bellows-mender.
Tonight we are actors in the forest, off the grid, surrounded
in the dark by fairies and spirits, snakes and coyotes.
Carnivorous vegans live in these woods. They leave the drum circle
to nibble at the sliced ham I smuggle in the folds of my costume.

I am three hundred pounds. The director of the company
saw me and said: *You are the Wall*. Two weeks ago I fell
off a wall, stepping into the darkness like a cartoon character
walking on air, waving *bye-bye*. I belly-flopped in a puddle of mud.
An elderly bystander, as if on cue, spoke her only line: *Are you OK?*
I am not OK. I have a fractured elbow. I wear a sling under my Wall costume,
the Styrofoam bricks and plastic vines, the wooden beam across my shoulders.
I cannot remember my lines. I hide the script in my sling with the ham.

The play begins. No one can find Lysander. He is in the bathroom
with dysentery. Theseus improvises dialogue in iambic pentameter.
His voice echoes and scares the coyotes in the hills. They howl
back at him. A snake writes his name in the dirt by my feet.
I tell no one. I don't want the fairies to panic. Cobweb and Mustardseed
might run into the tiki torches, and then their fairy wings would explode,
and the nearest hospital is forty miles away. The tiki torches
are the only source of light off the grid. It's Shakespeare in the Dark.
The woman playing Peter Quince is mean to small children.
When Bottom turns into a donkey and the Mechanicals flee,
I stand behind her and let her bounce off my chest. She falls down.
I want her to fall down. I ask: *Are you OK?* She is not OK. Fairy Queen
Titania's bed sways in the trees, threatening to topple and kill us all.

At the wedding of Theseus, Duke of Athens, we play Pyramus and Thisbe.
The aristocrats laugh at us, real actors on loan from the highbrow
Shakespearean company in the valley, and we snarl back at them.
I am the Wall. I am inspired. I lift Pyramus and Thisbe into the air
and slam them together for their kiss. The beam across my shoulders

cracks. The crack alarms the carnivorous vegans on picnic blankets watching the show. Some think the crack is my leg breaking. Some think the crack is a gunshot. Suddenly it's Ford's Theatre and I'm Lincoln. Or maybe I'm John Wilkes Booth. The jagged beam presses into my neck, against the artery in my neck, like the fangs of a vampire hungry for ham. One stumble and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ends in a bloodbath.

I bellow my last line: *Thus Wall away doth go*. I do a soft-shoe offstage. Five people pull the Wall costume over my head. Somebody asks: *Are you OK?* I am not OK. Then I see my son onstage. He is twelve. He is Moonshine. He cradles a half-blind Chihuahua and says, *This dog, my dog*. He lifts his lantern high, and his lantern is the moon. Even the sneering Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, must admit: *Well shone, Moon*. This moon shines like an uncirculated Kennedy half-dollar from the days when Kennedy was a martyred saint. The coyotes do not howl. The crickets fall silent. Even the fairies cease their gossip and giggling. We are the hard-handed men of Athens. This dog is our dog.