

Martín Espada

Haunt Me

for my father

I am the archaeologist. I sift the shards of you: cufflinks, passport photos, a button from the March on Washington with a black hand shaking a white hand, letters in Spanish, your birth certificate from a town high in the mountains. I cup your silence, and the silence melts like ice in a cup.

I search for you in two yellow Kodak boxes marked *Puerto Rico, Noche Buena, Diciembre 1968*. In the 8-millimeter silence the Espadas gather, elders born before the Spanish American War, my grandfather on crutches after fracturing his fossil hip, his blind brother on a cane. You greet the elders and they call you *Tato*, the name they call you there. Uncles and cousins sing in a chorus of tongues without sound, vibration of guitar strings stilled by an unseen hand, maracas shaking empty of seeds. The camera wobbles from the singers to the television and the astronauts sending pictures of the moon back to earth. Down by the river, women still pound laundry on the rocks.

I am eleven again, a boy from the faraway city of ice that felled my grandfather, startled after the blind man with the cane stroked my face with his hand dry as straw, crying out *Bendito*. At the table, I hear only the silence that rises like the river in my big ears. You sit next to me, clowning for the camera, tugging the lapels on your jacket, slicking back your black hair, brown skin darker from days in the sun. You slide your arm around my shoulder, your good right arm, your pitching arm, and my moon face radiates, and the mountain song of my uncles and cousins plays in my head.

Watching you now, my face stings as it stung when my blind great-uncle brushed my cheekbones, searching for his own face. When you died, *Tato*, I took a razor to the movie looping in my head, cutting the scenes where you curled an arm around my shoulder, all the times you would squeeze the silence out of me so I could hear the cries and songs again. When you died, I heard only the silences between us, the shouts belling the air before the phone went dead, all the words melting like ice in a cup.

That way I could set my jaw and take my mother's hand at the mortuary,
greet the elders in my suit and tie at the memorial, say all the right words.

Yet my face stings at last. I rewind and watch your arm drape across
my shoulder, over and over. A year ago, you pressed a Kodak slide
of my grandfather into my hand and said: *Next time, stay longer.*
Now, in the silence that is never silent, I push the chair away
from the table and say to you: *Sit down. Tell me everything. Haunt me.*