

Martín Espada

Here I Am

For José "JoeGo" Gouveia (1964-2014)

He swaggered into the room, a poet at a gathering of poets,
and the drinkers stopped crowding the cash bar, the talkers stopped
their tongues, the music stopped hammering the walls, the way
a saloon falls silent when a gunslinger knocks open the swinging doors:
JoeGo grinning in gray stubble and wraparound shades, leather Harley
vest, shirt yellow as a prospector's hallucination, sleeve buttoned
to hide the bandage on his arm where the IV pumped chemo through
his body a few hours ago. The nurse swabbed the puncture and told him
he could go, and JoeGo would go, gunning his red van from the Cape
to Boston, striding past the cops who guarded the hallways of the grand
convention center, as if to say *Here I am*: the butcher's son, the Portagee,
the roofer, the carpenter, the cab driver, the biker-poet. This was JoeGo,
who would shout his ode to Evel Knievel in biker bars till the brawlers
rolled in beer and broken glass, who married Josy from Brazil
on the beach after the oncologist told him he had two months to live
two years ago. *That's not enough for me*, he said, and will say again
when the cancer comes back to coil around his belly and squeeze hard
like a python set free and starving in the swamp. He calls me on his cell
from the hospital, and I can hear him scream when they press the cold
X-ray plates to his belly, but he will not drop the phone. He wants
the surgery today, right now, surrounded by doctors with hands
blood-speckled like the hands of his father the butcher, sawing

through the meat for the family feast. The patient's chart should read:
*This is JoeGo: after every crucifixion, he snaps the cross across his back
for firewood. He will roll the stone from the mouth of his tomb and bowl
a strike. On the night he silenced the drinkers chewing ice in my ear,
a voice in my ear said: What the hell is that man doing here?
And I said: That man there? That man will live forever.*