

Martín Espada

How We Could Have Lived or Died This Way

*Not songs of loyalty alone are these,
But songs of insurrection also,
For I am the sworn poet of every dauntless rebel the world over.*
Walt Whitman

I see the dark-skinned bodies falling in the street as their ancestors fell before the whip and steel, the last blood pooling, the last breath spitting. I see the immigrant street vendor flashing his wallet to the cops, shot so many times there are bullet holes in the soles of his feet. I see the deaf woodcarver and his pocketknife, crossing the street in front of a cop who yells, then fires. I see the drug raid, the wrong door kicked in, the minister's heart seizing up. I see the man hawking a fistful of cigarettes, the cop's chokehold that makes his wheezing lungs stop wheezing forever. I am in the crowd, at the window, kneeling beside the body left on the asphalt for hours, covered in a sheet.

I see the suicides: the conga player handcuffed for drumming on the subway, hanged in the jail cell with his hands cuffed behind him; the suspect leaking blood from his chest in the back seat of the squad car; the 300-pound boy said to stampede barehanded into the bullets drilling his forehead.

I see the coroner nodding, the words he types in his report burrowing into the skin like more bullets. I see the government investigations stacking, words buzzing on the page, then suffocated as bees suffocate in a jar. I see the next Black man, fleeing as the fugitive slave once fled the slave-catcher, shot in the back for a broken tail light. I see the cop handcuff the corpse.

I see the rebels marching, hands upraised before the riot squads, faces in bandannas against the tear gas, and I walk beside them unseen. I see the poets, who will write the songs of insurrection generations unborn will read or hear a century from now, words that make them wonder how we could have lived or died this way, how the descendants of slaves still fled and the descendants of slave-catchers still shot them, how we awoke every morning without the blood of the dead sweating from every pore.