

Martín Espada

Jumping Off the Mystic Tobin Bridge

I close my eyes and see him windmilling his arms as he plummets from the Mystic Tobin Bridge, to prove me wrong, to show me he was good, to atone for sins like seeds in the lopsided apple of his heart, but mostly to escape from me in the back of his cab, a Puerto Rican lawyer in a suit and tie.

I hated the 111 bus, sweltering in my suit and tie with the crowd in the aisle, waiting to hit a bump on the Mystic Tobin Bridge so my head would finally burst through the ceiling like a giraffe on a circus train. I hated the 111 bus after eviction day in Chelsea District Court, translating the landlords and judges into Spanish so the tenants knew they had to stuff their clothing into garbage bags and steal away again, away from the 40-watt squint that followed them everywhere, that followed me because I stood beside them in court. I would daydream in the humidity of the bus, a basketball hero, flipping the balled-up pages of the law into the wastebasket at the office as the legal aid lawyers chanted my name. I hated the 111 bus. I had to take a taxicab that day.

What the hell you doing here? said the driver of the cab to me in my suit and tie. *You gotta be careful in this neighborhood. There's a lotta Josés around here.* The driver's great-grandfather staggered off a boat so his great-grandson could one day drive me across the Mystic Tobin Bridge, but there was no room in the taxi for chalk and a blackboard. He could hear the sawing of my breath as I leaned into his ear, past the bulletproof barricade somehow missing, and said: *I'm a José.* I could see the 40-watt squint in his rear view mirror. *I'm Puerto Rican,* I said. It was exactly 5 PM, and we were stuck in traffic in a taxi on the Mystic Tobin Bridge.

The driver stammered his own West Side Story without the ballet, how a Puerto Rican gang stole his cousin's wallet years ago. *You think I'm gonna rob you?* I said, in my suit and tie, close enough now to tickle his ear with the mouth of a revolver. I could hear the sawing of his breath. He still wanted to know what I was doing there. *I'm a lawyer. I go to court with all the Josés,* I said. Stalled traffic steamed around us, the breath of cattle in the winter air. *Where you going for the holidays?* the driver said. I thought about Christmas Eve in court, eviction orders flying from the judge's

bench when tenants without legal aid lawyers, or children old enough to translate the English of the summons, did not answer to their names. Every year, the legal aid lawyers told the joke about The Christmas Defense: *Your honor, it's Christmas!* I said to the driver: *I will be spending Christmas right here with my fellow Josés.*

The driver shouted: *What do you want me to do? Get out of this cab and jump off the bridge?* We both knew what he meant. We both knew about Chuck Stuart, the last man to jump off the Mystic Tobin Bridge. Everybody knew how Chuck drove his wife to Mission Hill after birthing classes, the flash and pop in the dark when he shot her in the head and himself in the belly. Everybody knew how he conjured a Black carjacker on the crackling call to 911 the way the Mercury Theater of the Air conjured Martians in New Jersey on the radio half a century before. Everybody knew how a hundred cops pounded on door after door in the projects of Mission Hill, locking a Black man in a cage for the world to see like the last of his tribe on exhibit at the World's Fair. Everybody knew how Chuck would have escaped, cashing the insurance check to drive away with a new Nissan, but for his brother's confession, the accomplice throwing the Gucci bag with makeup, the wedding rings and the gun off the Dizzy Bridge in Revere. Everybody knew how Chuck parked his new car on the lower deck, left a note and launched himself deep into the black water, how the cops hauled his body from the river by lunchtime, when I walked into the office to tell the secretary: *Chuck Stuart just jumped off the Mystic Tobin Bridge.*

I said nothing to the driver. I almost nodded *yes* in the rear view mirror. I confess, for a flash, I wanted him to jump. The driver, the cops, the landlords, the judges all wanted us to jump off the Mystic Tobin Bridge, all wanted us to sprout gills like movie monsters so we could paddle underwater back to the islands, down into the weeds and mud at the bottom, past the fish-plucked ribcages of the dead, the rusty revolvers of a thousand crimes unsolved, the wedding rings of marriages gone bad, till we washed up onshore in a tangle of seaweed, gasping for air.

Last night, still more landed here, clothing stuffed in garbage bags, to flee the god of hurricanes flinging their houses into the sky or the god of hunger slipping his knife between the ribs, not a dark tide like the tide of the Mystic River, but builders of bridges. You can walk across the bridges they build. Or you can jump.