

Martín Espada

### **The Playboy Calendar and the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám**

The year I graduated from high school,  
my father gave me a Playboy calendar  
and the *Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám.

On the calendar, he wrote:

*Enjoy the scenery.*

In the book of poems, he wrote:

*I introduce you to an old friend.*

The Beast was my only friend in high school,  
a wrestler who crushed the coach's nose with his elbow,  
fractured the fingers of all his teammates,  
could drink half a dozen vanilla milkshakes,  
and signed up with the Marines  
because his father was a Marine.

I showed the Playboy calendar to The Beast  
and he howled like a silverback gorilla  
trying to impress an expedition of anthropologists.  
I howled too, smitten with the blonde  
called *Miss January*, held high in my simian hand.

Yet, alone at night, I memorized the poet-astronomer  
of Persia, his saints and sages bickering about eternity,  
his angel looming in the tavern door with a jug of wine,  
his *battered caravansera* of sultans fading into the dark.  
At seventeen, the laws of privacy have been revoked  
by the authorities, and the secret police are everywhere:  
I learned to hide Khayyám and his beard  
inside the folds of the Playboy calendar  
in case anyone opened the door without knocking,  
my brother with a baseball mitt or a beery Beast.

I last saw The Beast that summer at the Marine base  
in Virginia called Quantico. He rubbed his shaven head,  
and the sunburn made the stitches from the car crash years ago  
stand out like tiny crosses in the field of his face.

I last saw the Playboy calendar in December of that year,  
when it could no longer tell me the week or the month.

I last saw Omar Khayyám this morning:  
*Awake! He said. For Morning in the Bowl of Night  
Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight.*

*Awake! He said. And I awoke.*