

Martín Espada

The Poet's Coat

For Jeff Male (1946-2003)

When I cough, people duck away,
afraid of the coal miner's disease,
the imagined eruption of blood
down the chin. In the emergency room
the doctor gestures at the X-ray
where the lung crumples like a tossed poem.

You heard me cough, slipped off your coat
and draped it with ceremony across my shoulders,
so I became the king of rain and wind.
Keep it, you said. You are my teacher.
I kept it, a trench coat with its own film noir detective swagger.

The war in Viet Nam snaked rivers of burning sampans
through your brain, but still your hands
filled with poems gleaming like fish.
The highways of Virginia sent Confederate ghost-patrols
to hang you in dreams, a Black man with too many books,
but still you tugged the collar of your coat around my neck.

Now you are dead, your heart throbbing too fast
for the doctors at the veterans' hospital to keep the beat,
their pill bottles rattling, maracas in a mambo for the doomed.
On the night of your memorial service in Boston,
I wore your coat in a storm along the Florida shoreline.
The wind stung my face with sand, and with every slap
I remembered your ashes; with every salvo of arrows
in the rain your coat became the armor of a samurai.
On the beach I found the skeleton of a blowfish,
his spikes and leopard skin eaten away by the conqueror salt.
Your coat banished the conqueror back into the sea.

Soon your ashes fly to the veterans' cemetery at Arlington,

where once a Confederate general
would have counted you among his mules and pigs.
This poet's coat is your last poem.
I want to write a poem like this coat,
with buttons and pockets and green cloth,
a poem useful as a coat to a coughing man.
Teach me.

