

Martín Espada

The Right Foot of Juan de Oñate

On the road to Taos, in the town of Alcalde, the bronze statue of Juan de Oñate, the conquistador, kept vigil from his horse. Late one night a chainsaw sliced off his right foot, stuttering through the ball of his ankle, as Oñate's spirit scratched and howled like a dog trapped within the bronze body.

Four centuries ago, after his cannon fire burst to burn hundreds of bodies and blacken the adobe walls of the Acoma Pueblo, Oñate wheeled on his startled horse and spoke the decree: all Acoma males above the age of twenty-five would be punished by amputation of the right foot. Spanish knives sawed through ankles; Spanish hands tossed feet into piles like fish at the marketplace. There was prayer and wailing in a language Oñate did not speak.

Now, at the airport in El Paso, across the river from Juárez, another bronze statue of Oñate rises on a horse frozen in fury. The city fathers smash champagne bottles across the horse's legs to christen the statue, and Oñate's spirit remembers the chainsaw carving through the ball of his ankle. The Acoma Pueblo still stands. Thousands of brown feet walk across the border, the desert of Chihuahua, the shallow places of the Río Grande, the bridges from Juárez to El Paso. Oñate keeps watch, high on horseback above the Río Grande, the law of the conquistador rolled in his hand, helpless as a man with an amputated foot, spirit scratching and howling like a dog within the bronze body.