

Martín Espada

### **The Face on the Envelope**

*For Julia de Burgos (1914-1953)*

Julia was tall, so tall, the whispers said,  
the undertakers amputated her legs at the knee  
to squeeze her body into the city coffin  
for burial at Potter's Field.

Dying on a street in East Harlem:  
She had no discharge papers  
from Goldwater Memorial Hospital,  
no letters from Puerto Rico, no poems.  
Without her name, three words  
like three pennies stolen from her purse  
while she slept off the last bottle of rum,  
Julia's coffin sailed to a harbor  
where the dead stand in the rain  
patient as forgotten umbrellas.

All her poems flowed river-blue, river-brown, river-red.  
Her Río Grande de Loíza was a fallen blue piece of sky;  
her river was a bloody stripe whenever the torrent  
burst and the hills would vomit mud.

A monument rose at the cemetery in her hometown.  
There were parks and schools. She was memorized.  
Yet only the nameless, names plucked as their faces  
turned away in labor or sleep, could return Julia's name to her  
with the grace of a beggar offering back a stranger's wallet.

Years later, a nameless man from Puerto Rico,  
jailed in a city called Hartford, would read her poem  
about the great river of Loíza till the river gushed  
through the faucet in his cell and sprayed his neck.  
Slowly, every night, as fluorescent light grew weary  
and threatened to quit, he would paint Julia's face  
on an envelope: her hair in waves of black, her lips red,  
her eyelids so delicate they almost trembled. Finally,  
meticulous as a thief, he inscribed the words: *Julia de Burgos*.

He could never keep such treasure under his pillow,  
so he slipped a letter into the envelope  
and mailed it all away, flying through the dark  
to find my astonished hands.