

Martín Espada

**The Poet in the Box**

*for Brandon*

*We have a problem with Brandon,*

the assistant warden said.

*He's a poet.*

At the juvenile detention center

demonic poetry fired Brandon's fist

into the forehead of another inmate.

Metaphor, that cackling spirit, drove him to flip

another boy's cafeteria tray onto the floor.

The staccato chorus rhyming in his head

told him to spit and curse

at enemies bigger by a hundred pounds.

The gnawing in his rib cage was a craving for discipline.

Repeatedly two guards shuffled him

to the cell called the box, solitary confinement,

masonry of silence fingered by hallucinating drifters,

rebels awaiting execution, monks in prayer.

*Then we figured it out,* the assistant warden said.

*He started fights so we'd throw him*

*in solitary, where he could write.*

The box: There poetry was a grasshopper in the bowl of his hands,  
pencil chiseling letters across his notebook  
like the script of a pharaoh's deeds on pyramid walls;  
metaphor spilled from the light he trapped  
in his eyelids, lamps of incandescent words;  
rhyme harmonized through the voices  
of great-grandmothers and sharecropper bluesmen  
whenever sleep began to whistle in his breath.  
So the cold was a blanket to him.

*We fixed Brandon, the assistant warden said.  
We stopped punishing him. He knows  
that every violation means he stays here longer.*

Tonight there are poets  
who versify vacations in Tuscany,  
the villa on a hill, the light of morning;  
poets who stare at computer screens  
and imagine cockroach powder  
dissolved into the coffee  
of the committee that said no to tenure;  
poets who drain whiskey bottles  
and urinate on the shoes of their disciples;  
poets who cannot sleep as they contemplate  
the extinction of iambic pentameter;  
poets who watch the sky, waiting for a poem

to plunge in a white streak through blackness.

Brandon dreams of punishment,  
stealing the keys from a sleepy jailer  
to lock himself into the box, where he can hear  
the scratching of his pencil  
like fingernails on dungeon stone.