

Martín Espada

Blessed Be The Truth-Tellers

For Jack Agüeros

In the projects of Brooklyn, everyone lied.

My mother used to say:

*If somebody starts a fight,
just walk away.*

Then somebody would smack
the back of my head
and dance around me in a circle, laughing.

When I was twelve, pus bubbled
on my tonsils, and everyone said:

*After the operation, you can have
all the ice cream you want.*

I bragged about the deal;
no longer would I chase the ice cream truck
down the street, panting at the bells
to catch Johnny the ice cream man,
who allegedly sold heroin the color of vanilla
from the same window.

Then Jack the Truth-Teller visited the projects,
Jack who herded real camels and sheep
through the snow of East Harlem every Three Kings' Day,
Jack who wrote sonnets of the jail cell
and the racetrack and the boxing ring,
Jack who crossed his arms in a hunger strike
until the mayor hired more Puerto Ricans.

And Jack said:

*You gonna get your tonsils out?
Ay bendito cuchifrito Puerto Rico.
That's gonna hurt.*

I was etherized,
then woke up on the ward

heaving black water onto white sheets.
A man poking through his hospital gown
leaned over me and sneered:
You think you got it tough? Look at this!
and showed me the cauliflower tumor
behind his ear. I heaved up black water again.

The ice cream burned.
Vanilla was a snowball spiked with bits of glass.
My throat was red as a tunnel on fire
after the head-on collision of two gasoline trucks.

This is how I learned to trust
the poets and shepherds of East Harlem.
Blessed be the Truth-Tellers,
for they shall have all the ice cream they want.