

MARTÍN ESPADA

The Day We Buried You in the Park

If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles.

— *Walt Whitman*

The day we buried you in the park
I couldn't say no. Your wife had a plan,
revealed on the phone with the hush of conspiracy;
there are laws in this city against the interment
of human remains in public spaces.

This was the Poets' Park, your vision
floating like the black butterflies of cinders
over the house in ruins across the street.
You and Juan saw the stone steps flowing down
into the circle where the poets would stand and sing one day.
You and Juan saw the poets showering the air with words
and the trees drinking words like water.
You nailed up the sign and spread your arms to greet us
at the ceremony. This could not be explained
to the clerk who stamps the licenses
for the burial of the dead.

Juan began to cry when he saw your ashes
in the wheelbarrow. I shook him by the shoulder;
the neighbor who watches the park from her window
was eyeing us. I handed him the shovel.
We had to clamp our jaws like mobsters
stoically soiling their hands with the grit of a rival thug.
Your wife poured a bag of plant food over your ashes
in case the neighbor peeked too long through the hedges
or the cops rolled their cruiser to a stop, bored
after years of shoving drunks into the back seat.
We stirred the ashes with our hands till they turned white at the wrist,
and what I'd heard was true: there is bone that will not burn,
bodies that refuse to become dust, the stubborn shards of a man.
Ask any criminal who labors to bury the evidence.

We weren't criminals. We dug the hole in the wrong place,
ripped out the roots, grunted with every shovel full of rocks.
We made the little grave too big, then tossed away the dirt,
forgetting that we'd need to fill the hole once we dumped you in it.
When I tipped the wheelbarrow, your ashes landed with a puff,
drifting in the briefest of clouds over the grass, and Juan
dropped to his knees, crying again, giving us away.
The neighbor poked her head from the window
like a chicken suspicious of the world beyond the coop.

An hour after we began, I wore a mask of ash and sweat, black shoes white,
like the last man in the village to hear the warning of volcano,
or a miner on the first day back at work after the strike is lost,
or a believer smeared with his ancestors about to wash in the great river.
A woman who recognized my face stopped me as I crossed the street.
Did you just bury something in the park? she asked.
Why would I do a thing like that, I said.

The day we buried you in the park, I drove home
with three scoops of your ashes in a coffee can:
Chock full o'Nuts, the Heavenly Coffee, their slogan
emblazoned in a cloud across the New York skyline.
At your desk there was bad coffee and good poetry,
but no heaven, so I will look for you under my bootsoles,
walking through the world, soaking up the ghosts wherever I may go.