

MARTÍN ESPADA

I Now Pronounce You Dead

For Sacco and Vanzetti, executed August 23, 1927

On the night of his execution, Bartolomeo Vanzetti, immigrant from Italia, fishmonger, anarchist, shook the hand of Warden Hendry and thanked him for everything. *I wish to forgive some people for what they are now doing to me*, said Vanzetti, blindfolded, strapped down to the chair that would shoot two thousand volts through his body.

The warden's eyes were wet. The warden's mouth was dry. The warden heard his own voice croak: *Under the law I now pronounce you dead*. No one could hear him. With the same hand that shook the hand of Bartolomeo Vanzetti, Warden Hendry of Charlestown Prison waved at the executioner, who gripped the switch to yank it down.

The walls of Charlestown Prison are gone, to ruin, to dust, to mist. Where the prison stood there is a school; in the hallways, tongues speak the Spanish of the Dominican, the Portuguese of Cabo Verde, the Creole of Haiti. No one can hear the last words of Vanzetti, or the howl of thousands on Boston Common when they knew.

After midnight, at the hour of the execution, Warden Hendry sits in the cafeteria, his hand shaking as if shocked, rice flying off his fork, so he cannot eat no matter how the hunger feeds on him, babbling the words that only he can hear: *I now pronounce you dead*.