

MARTIN ESPADA

The Alternative is Silence

in memory. . .

Jim Hicks: “The Cow Head Revelations”—the novel submitted as James Foley’s M.A. thesis at UMass—tells the story of a young schoolteacher from the Northeast named James Foley who works in Arizona. Finding this out about the thesis made me wonder if he’d actually done any teaching like that?

Martín Espada: Yes. Jim took part in Teach For America. He went to Arizona in the 1990s, and taught at the Lowell Elementary School in Phoenix, in the barrio. He loved it. He wanted to do more of that sort of thing. I believe our first encounter was in the fall of 2000. I taught my Latino poetry class that semester, and Jim was one of the MFA students who took that class as an independent study. Jim was interested in the Latino community. He spoke Spanish. At some point, he came to me and said, “I taught in Phoenix; I taught in the barrio there; I taught with Teach for America. I want to do something like that again.” I said, “I know about this place in Holyoke called The Care Center, but they really need people who are bilingual.” He said, “I’m bilingual.” So it was easy to refer Jim over to The Care Center. They snapped him up and they loved him. He taught English to their monolingual Spanish speakers.

Today, just by chance, I heard from The Care Center. I had to schedule my reading and visit with students there for the end of November. Ana Rodríguez, the educational director there, emailed me back and said, “Yes, this date will work for us, and we want to offer our condolences for Jim Foley.” She went on to describe how much they loved him and how grateful they were that I sent him their way. I hadn’t even remembered that I sent him there. Then it all came flooding back.

This was only fifteen minutes before you rang the doorbell.

All this is one one-thousandth of what his family must be going through. I have the luxury of psychologically shutting down—they don’t. . . We see the headlines. We have our politics and our ethics, and we bring our history and our respective agendas to the headlines. But it’s an

abstraction; it's in the distance. Then one day the war comes home. And we lose that distance.

Jim Hicks: I was thinking, too, about the uncanny space that emerges out of something like this. In response, one of the things we do is tell stories.

Martín Espada: Yes. We tell them and we hear them. . . As a poet, I want the ghosts; I invite them in and I say, "haunt me." I've written ten poems about my father since he died this year. Ten poems. I am supposed to welcome the memories; as a poet, I'm supposed to have the courage to articulate what others cannot. But I won't let this in. I won't let it in. I wasn't even aware of that consciously. You know, I look things in the eye—it's what I do. So now I find myself wondering: What will I remember next?

Jim Hicks: It's an ambush, isn't it? Sometimes you're ambushed by your own thoughts. But do you really think it *can* be looked at in the face? There's this great essay where Calvino talks about the Medusa . . .

Martín Espada: In many ways, poets are akin to preachers in this society. When somebody dies, others look to us to make sense of it. Others look to us to distill meaning out of it. That's why I find myself speaking at many a memorial service, even when I am not particularly close to the person who has died. People expect me to make sense of it for them. They expect me to write something, or to find something someone else has written, and help them to heal.

What is the admonition? Healer, heal thyself? With the benefit of hindsight, with the benefit of experience, I'm not sure that the elegy I write helps to heal *me*. I don't know. My last book was dedicated to five different people who had died, including such people as Howard Zinn. I was very close to Howard. And now I'm writing poems for my father and. . . will I write a poem for Jim Foley? I hope I have the courage to that. And yet I have already decided that I am not going to look at that video. I won't do it.

Jim Hicks: It's just wrong to look at it. It's just wrong.

Martín Espada: The day before yesterday, I was blindsided by a reporter who had watched the video. . .

Yesterday or the day before, I was blindsided by a reporter, one of the TV reporters that had watched the video. . .

Jim Hicks: Of course.

Martín Espada: Yes. She asked me questions based on the assumption that I had seen it, too. And I said, “I won’t. I will not watch that video. I think it’s wrong.” She asked me if that was the real Jim in the video, if that was the way I remember him. I wouldn’t answer that question even if I could.

Jim Hicks: That’s one where you tell them: *unask* that question.

Martín Espada: Yes, yes. Unask it. I had been warned. Ben Balthaser, a fellow MFA student and poet who was close to Jim, told me he “made the mistake” of watching it. It must have been posted on YouTube. And he watched it. He said he couldn’t close his eyes afterwards. I get the *Boston Globe*, it comes to my inbox, so I first read the news there, but I couldn’t believe it.

This guy. . . had already been abducted once, in Libya, and had miraculously come home. I expected another miracle. I wasn’t the only one who knew Jim and expected another miracle. Once someone does the impossible, you expect that person to do the impossible again. With that in mind, I started looking for confirmation. I found an NBC report showing that still photograph that everybody is now seeing, which was bad enough. I thought, “Alright, I know I don’t want to see any more.”

Now there are stories about the media coverage; the media is being reflexive, looking at itself. I read that the *New York Post* had done something terrible. Shocking, right? It turns out they had used a horrific image taken out of the video. I read a description of that image in the *Huffington Post*, and got out of there. Then I saw provocative headline from *The Daily Beast*. I went to it, and sure enough, it described the video in detail: lurid, graphic detail. Again I pulled out of there.

You cannot compare the horror of the act itself with the exploitation of the act. But the exploitation is nonetheless horrible. What the *Post* did was exploitation of Jim Foley’s murder. What *The Daily Beast* did was likewise exploitation of Jim Foley’s murder. As if he didn’t have family, or friends, or teachers, or colleagues, or students. As if all of us were somehow at this great remove, standing at this great height, with the luxury

of distance. Well, some of us don't have that luxury. But in the interest of selling newspapers, anything is possible.

a clarity of purpose. . .

Jim Hicks: Tell us more about being called upon as the person who's supposed to make sense of what can't be made sense of. . . A lonely job. But you're also not alone. One of the reasons that I wrote you, and that we came to talk to you, is that people also come together in such times. Of course, the stories that we tell are not going to displace the *New York Post*—

Martín Espada: No.

Jim Hicks: But they have work to do, too. So tell us what you remember of Jim as a student. Let's move the focus away from that awful moment to. . . what was he like in a classroom? Did you see him much outside the classroom?

Martín Espada: I am piecing this together, so my memories are incomplete. I served on Jim's thesis committee. Jim took my classes, my Latino poetry class and my class called "Reading and Writing Poetry of the Political Imagination." In the classroom Jim was very clear, extraordinarily lucid. He had a capacity for clarity of thought and clarity of speech. Very few people have that gift. He reminded me of Howard Zinn in that way. Howard had that, this wonderful capacity to be clear. It's an underrated virtue.

Jim had that—clarity of thought, this clarity of speech, and, as I was to discover, clarity of purpose. Everything he did and said was grounded in a strong sense of ethics, a strong sense of principle. That's why he was taking my class in the first place. He wanted to reconnect with that community he found in Arizona. He wanted to connect with the Latino experience; he wanted to connect again with the Spanish language. He wanted to connect with those who connected with those things. At the time, I was the only Latino faculty member in the department. That is how our relationship began.

Outside the classroom, I remember long conversations in my office where we talked about his future. We talked about Arizona, about Phoenix, about Teach for America. We talked about the barrio. We

talked about The Care Center. We talked about the politics of the Latino community, about bilingualism and the threat to bilingual education, a form of education that still existed at the beginning of this century. That seems so long ago now.

I remember that we discussed the idea of Jim teaching incarcerated people. He taught at the Cook County Jail “boot camp.” I remember talking to him about teaching incarcerated people because I had done that. I taught at the Worcester County House of Corrections in 1993. I went on to visit and read at prisons in Connecticut, Massachusetts and New York. I have a poem called “The Prisoners of Saint Lawrence” about visiting an institution in upstate New York. A few years ago, I did a reading at the Franklin County Jail. I was hosted by Dan Mahoney, one of the MFA students who was friends with Jim.

This was the constant: Jim was grounded in a deep form of humanism. I believe that humanism came from the faith of his family, that his faith was an applied faith. It came from the values he was taught in that household. I do not recall if we talked about journalism. We may have. It may be one of the memories I’m repressing.

la lucha sigue. . .

Jim Hicks: This is close to another topic that we should talk about. Everyone gets called in some different way. I was wondering if in some sense you did already see glimpses of the path that Jim would take. And it sounds to me that not only the answer is “yes,” but, in some sense, he was already on it, and was making choices, looking for the tools he could use, and deciding where he should go.

Martín Espada: The answer to that question is an emphatic “yes.” He was looking for the tools. It was simply a matter of which tools he would choose. There were absolutely some common threads. For one thing, Jim was determined to use the power of the word. For another, Jim was determined to tell the truth. For a third, Jim was determined to find some vehicle for storytelling. He was an MFA in fiction, and he told stories to the very end. He told stories to the very end.

Emily Wojcik: And even if his MFA thesis is in fiction, it is about a man named James Foley who taught in a barrio in Arizona. Storytelling, but with an adherence to truth, even in a novel.

Martín Espada: Many times young writers begin with fiction or poetry that is autobiographical, or thinly veiled autobiography. That, in itself, would not be surprising. But Jim was using that personal history as a vehicle to tell the truth about the barrio, and about Arizona. What would Jim say about today's Arizona, about that stewing cauldron of bigotry, our modern-day Mississippi? About a place where, parenthetically but not coincidentally, one of my books was banned? The book is called *Zapata's Disciple*, published by South End Press, a collection of essays and poems. It was part of the curriculum in the Mexican-American Studies program in Tucson, banned along with the rest of the curriculum with House Bill 2281, that outlawed ethnic studies and anything that would foster "ethnic resentment," as if the banning of ethnic studies would not foster ethnic resentment.

Jim Hicks: One of the last chapters of Jim's thesis was called: "*Zapata vive, la lucha sigue*." That's his title.

Martín Espada: I published that book in 1998. I don't know if Jim was familiar with it. Clearly he knew of Zapata. "Zapata's disciple" is a phrase that I borrowed from a book called *The Enemies of the Poor*, by James Graham. The reference was to my father. He was a community activist in Brooklyn in the 1960s; Graham compared him to a "disciple of Emiliano Zapata, the Mexican revolutionary." I ended up writing an essay about my father, the title essay of that collection. That was the book banned in Arizona.

These stories, like the story of what's happening in Arizona, are stories that need to be told, because most of the time they are not told. Jim was in Syria, as his family put it, "to expose the suffering of the people of Syria." Jim was in Libya for the same reason. Jim was in Arizona for the same reason. Jim's MFA thesis was not written to glorify him, but to expose the suffering and the resistance to suffering in the barrios of Arizona among people of Mexican origin or descent. They are suffering now even more than when Jim was teaching in Phoenix. And so, as he said, *la lucha sigue*—the struggle goes on—because it does. That means the stories have to be told over and over again. Over and over we have to come out of the shadows. Most of the time, the people who don't want the story told win. Censorship works. The press that published my book has gone belly up as of this year. On a whole different level, the people

who commit murder to shut other people up usually get away with it.

So we come back to Jim Foley. He was trying to tell a story and, like so many journalists, not only in the Middle East, not only in Syria, but around the world, he lost his life in the process.

Jim Hicks: One aspect of this is something that I've been thinking about a lot recently. I'm working on translating an author, an Italian novelist and poet, Erri De Luca, and he is going to be tried and possibly put in prison in January in Italy for expressing his opinion.

Martín Espada: Yes, it happens in various ways, to varying degrees.

Jim Hicks: In this case, it's for an alleged "instigation to commit crimes," said to have occurred in an interview where he discussed a resistance movement that he supports. Erri says that what he's charged with is nothing compared to the instigation he *aspires* to. Before he became an activist, he himself was inspired—by Orwell, by Shalamov, by Pasolini. Not "instigated," *inspired*. And so the question is simply where does inspiration come from? Where does somebody like Jim find that call?

Martín Espada: Clearly, Jim found his inspiration from being there. He found his inspiration from being there, on the ground, where things were happening. That was true when he taught in the barrios of Phoenix, when he taught at the Cook County Jail boot camp, when he taught adolescent Puerto Rican mothers in Holyoke—among the most despised people.

I believe Jim took his inspiration from being there, wherever there happened to be. We know that because of the fiction he wrote, from his MFA thesis about Arizona and a teacher named Jim Foley teaching there in the barrio. We know that because he continued in that vein. Wherever it was happening, that's where he wanted to be.

bearing witness. . .

Martín Espada: There are poets like this; there are fiction writers like this. There are poets who worked as journalists, like Carl Sandburg, who started off as a journalist and never lost his journalistic instincts. Jim simply moved in the other direction, away from fiction and towards journalism. But the common denominator is taking his inspiration from being there.

That's what he was doing in the Middle East; that's what he was doing in Libya the first time he was taken, and that's what he was doing in Syria the second time he was taken. That's how he got his inspiration.

That's why he went back, I think. I've turned that question over in my head many a time, many a time. I'm reminded of Wilfred Owen. Think about Wilfred Owen.

Jim Hicks: Yes, he was in hospital; he didn't have to go back.

Martín Espada: Wilfred Owen was hospitalized at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, Scotland, during World War I, with shellshock, what we would now call PTSD. That's where he wrote some of the greatest anti-war poems in the history of the English language. And he decided to go back to the front lines. Siegfried Sassoon, his mentor, threatened to stab him in the leg if he went back, and he went back! He. Went. Back. I, who never knew Sassoon, never knew Owen, have mourned that decision myself. I teach Wilfred Owen every year. Every year, when I teach the course called "Poetry of the Political Imagination," I begin with Wilfred Owen. I taught Wilfred Owen to Jim Foley in the spring of 2002.

Wilfred Owen went back and he died. He was killed in France, one week before the Armistice was signed, ending the war in November of 1918. The telegram announcing the news of his death was delivered to his family while the Armistice bells were ringing, on the 11th of November.

Now I think of Wilfred Owen again, as I think of Jim Foley, because, like Wilfred Owen, Jim Foley went back. And I have to ask why. I never asked him myself. I never had the chance. I know what many people would have done, especially in this day and age. Many people in Jim Foley's position would have stayed here and written a book! *My Forty-Four Days in Captivity*. He could have secured a big contract from a big New York publishing house; they would have published it with a big advance, and he could have toured the country, giving lectures and signing books. It would have been a very good book. And he still would have met his obligation to tell the truth, to tell the story.

He didn't do it that way. He went back, because that was not good enough for him. Something drove him, something more, his principles, his ethics, his sense perhaps—and he may have had this in common with

Wilfred Owen—that the only way to tell the truth was to be there. That’s how Owen felt, in the end, that the only way to tell the truth about the war, which Owen hated, was to go back and be there. He had to bear witness. You can’t bear witness unless you’re there.

Wilfred Owen had to bear witness and he died. He was twenty-five years old. Jim Foley had to bear witness. He went back and he died. He was forty. We think of everything they could have done, the lives they could have led, because we know, if you’re fifty-seven as I am, that we lead many lives. Not only one life, but many lives, especially if you have the intelligence and the resourcefulness and the courage that Jim Foley had. He had a combination of physical courage and moral courage. Moral courage is even more rare than physical courage.

I used to have a friend who was a veteran in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. His name was Abe Osheroff. That’s him on the wall over there, the white-bearded fellow. He went as a volunteer to fight against fascism in Spain during the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s. Abe used to say that physical courage is unusual, but it is not so unusual as moral courage, and very few people have both. He saw people in Spain who had both. Strangely enough, even though Jim Foley never picked up a gun—he wouldn’t do that—I now think of Jim Foley in the context of the volunteers who went to fight against fascism in the 1930s with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

And perhaps I think about them, too, because of Ben Balthaser. Because Ben had the presence of mind to remember a poem when he found out about Jim’s murder. It was a poem by Genevieve Taggard—do you know this poem?

Emily Wojcik I have heard “Calling Western Union,” which I very much like.

Martín Espada: This is a different poem. I’ll pull a book off the shelf behind you. It’s here. It’s in *The Wound and the Dream: Sixty Years of American Poems about the Spanish Civil War*, edited by Cary Nelson, who’s a wonderful scholar. Genevieve Taggard is one of those forgotten poets that Cary Nelson has done so much to recollect.

Ben quoted the second half of this poem to me. It spoke to him, and speaks to me, about Jim Foley. It’s called “To the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.”

*Say of them they were young, there was much they did not know,
They were human. Say it all; it is true. Now say
When the eminent, the great, the easy, the old,
And the men on the make
Were busy bickering and selling,
Betraying, conniving, transacting, splitting hairs,
Writing bad articles, signing bad papers,
Passing bad bills,
Bribing, blackmailing,
Whimpering, meaching, garroting,—they
Knew and acted
understood and died.*

Emily Wojcik: Yes. That's it. . .

Martín Espada: Yes. That's it. This is all.

the past is not past. . .

Jim Hicks: It's odd how sometimes history almost rhymes. . . At times, if you have some depth of knowledge about the richness of one moment in the past, when something else comes up, you can't not think of it in the present.

Martín Espada: Yes. This poem had been written in 1941. The world had gone mad. Poets like Genevieve Taggard still had to find a way to make sense of it, to make it clear. And that is still our mission as poets, writers, journalists. Surely, the world has gone mad again. That's what I see in the murder of Jim Foley. And that's what I see in those who would exploit his murder, whether it's the sensationalistic media or the warmongers who would seek to drop more bombs.

Jim Hicks: Yes. I know this is not an easy conversation. And it's a conversation that we will continue. But I did want to ask you about the President's comments in response to Jim's murder. Let me cite directly: "The United States of America will continue to do what we must do to protect our people. We will be vigilant and we will be relentless. When people harm Americans anywhere we do what's necessary to see that

justice is done, and we act against ISIS standing alongside others.”

In his final paragraph, Obama mentions Jim three times, and America or Americans the same number of times.

Now, we don’t have to rehearse yet again the brutality and horror of what happened to Jim Foley, but. . . my question is pretty simple. Is the proper response to nationalize his death? It feels to me that we’re giving the thugs exactly what they want.

Martín Espada: ISIS gave the warmongers of this country exactly what they wanted: A new enemy. With that video showing this unspeakable, brutal, sadistic act, ISIS gave the warmongers the propaganda tool they have wanted to rejuvenate U.S. support for warfare. And this government is giving ISIS exactly what they want.

Did this government protect Jim Foley? Did the bombs this government dropped two weeks ago protect Jim Foley? Will the bombs they drop tomorrow protect Jim Foley? Will they protect the other journalists who are being held by ISIS? When we engage in a cycle of retribution without end. . .

I just want it to end. I just want it over. This war has come home, with the killing of my student—my student, my friend, Jim Foley—and I want it to end. And the bombs they drop tomorrow will not make it end. Will it be over? I think we know the answer to that. It will not end. It will not be over. And those bombs, it must be said, fall on the heads of the innocent as well as the guilty. It must be said. Everyone on all sides understands this. That’s where we get the euphemism, “collateral damage.”

The bombs this country drops provide the best recruitment vehicle ISIS could ever dream of, the best propaganda tool they can have.

something poets do. . .

Jim Hicks: This was something that I needed to ask you about, but I also feel that we can’t leave it at that. We need to reframe the narrative to focus on what work like Jim Foley’s is about, on why he did what he did. Otherwise, it *does* become fodder for the warmongering that you’ve been describing.

Martín Espada: Yes. That’s the challenge we now face. As we mourn, how do we remember? As we remember, how do we tell stories? As we speak

of the unspeakable, how do we find the words? As we try to console the inconsolable, how do we go about it? One of Jim's fellow students, Luivette Resto, emailed me earlier today. She was saying, "I'm numb. The war has come home. But I want to organize. I want to organize a poetry reading for Jim."

She lives in L.A. I think of other MFAs, students of mine who were close to Jim. Yago Cura lives in L.A., too, and Dan Mahoney in Maine, and Ben Balthaser in Indiana. I'm still in Massachusetts. How are we going to do it? How are we going to get together for what seems to us like a very human and obvious response? More than a decade has gone by and we've been scattered to the winds. We have to find a way to come together. I don't know how we're going to do that yet, but that's the first step, I think, for those of us who knew him, here, at UMass, who knew him at The Care Center in Holyoke, who knew the work he did there, who knew the principled person that he was. The first step for us is to find a way to come together and talk to each other.

I can't speak for anyone else. I want to be very clear about that. I can't speak for Jim. Everything I have said to you comes from me. I can't speak for Jim's family. I can't imagine the horror of losing a child, much less losing a child in such a brutal and a public way. I can't conceive of it. It's unthinkable. So I can't speak for them. I can only speak for myself. I know how Ben feels. I know how Luivette feels. I know how Ana Rodríguez feels at The Care Center. We are starting to talk to each other. We have to keep talking to each other. We might find a way to gather in the same space. I hope we do.

This is something that poets do in response to brutality, in response to murder. We get together, and we read poems and we listen to poems. It's what we do. And we know that poetry can save us, can keep us going, can keep us alive. We know that about poetry. So that is where we meet again.

The alternative is silence. And silence is what ISIS wanted for Jim Foley. Silence is what this government wants, to go on with the endless wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. And silence is absolutely the last thing we must give them.

Jim Hicks: Thanks, Martin.