

# Better Than Stealing a Necklace of Bullets

Madison, Wisconsin, 1978-79

By Martín Espada

We were living together for a week when my girlfriend said: *I'm tired of living with you.* My comrade Dog said I could stay at his commune, so I slung the duffle on my shoulder and landed on the fold-out couch with the bar crucifying my body bony as a pickerel. I ate more garbanzos than anyone else. One night, I ate half a tray of marijuana brownies, not realizing why they were so crunchy. I reeled into a room of books and read the name on every spine of every book in the room. Dog told me my nickname at the commune was *Don't Mind If I Do*, warned me they were afraid I would tear the refrigerator door off the hinges at midnight. After two weeks, they voted me out of the house and into the snow. I called my father nine hundred miles away. *Send money*, I said. *You send money*, he said. My history professor fed me lunch once a week, even though I was a dropout. He would tell the waiter: *Bring us both a bowl of sizzling rice soup, and then I will give you the rest of our order.* He always loaned me the bills in his wallet.

My car coughed like a man who used one cigarette to light another, tail pipe snapped off and sleeping in the back seat. We sputtered to the radio station. I read the news in a pledge drive baritone, learned to splice reel-to-reel tape and red-pencil the UPI feed five minutes before airtime. The engineer told me about the empty apartment between the newsroom and the transmitter for a hundred dollars a month. My salary at the station was zero dollars and zero cents. The landlady said the first month was free if I cleaned up the apartment.

A bag dripped gold under the kitchen sink, potatoes so rotten they liquified. The fumes made my belly spin as I scrubbed the revenge of a million French fries. Like an archeologist standing in the ruins, I traced with a finger the head-shaped hole in the wall, tiptoed around the motorcycle headlight in shards on the carpet. I stuffed a towel into the hole. I swept away the last debris of the biker brawl. I scavenged a microwave that did not electrocute me when I plugged it in, then stacked up cans of chili from the store on the corner. I plunged the toilet with the curses of Ahab in my throat. They called me *The Phantom of WORT*, *Back Porch Radio*, drifting into the station at midnight in my bathrobe, dropping the needle on records at 3 AM when the all-night jazz DJ had to call his girlfriend or study the smoke curling from the joint in his hand. My comrade Dog would deliver free egg rolls from Tony's Chop Suey. I was awake at dawn to hear *Los Madrugadores*, The Early Risers, play Mexican music for the farmworkers.

My coughing car strangled one day, rolling dead through a red light where I could be speared from everywhere. The tow truck dumped my car in the fire lane next to the station. Spiderwebs spread across the steering wheel. Dandelions grew from a crack in the engine block. The fire marshal knocked on my door one day to threaten me with a fine if I didn't move my car. *Go ahead and fine me*, I said. *I can't pay it, and there are dandelions growing from a crack in the engine block.*

I was loitering on the couch in the station when the Chairman of the Party arrived with his bodyguards. After Mao died, a delegation from the Party told my history professor: *We've broken with Beijing.* He said: *Does Beijing know this?* The Chairman of the Party wore his floppy cap at an angle. He wore a leather jacket. He wore a necklace of bullets. I craved a can of chili in my kitchen.

A brown paste of beef and bean called to me. The bodyguards of the Chairman blocked the doorway and folded their arms, wordlessly. Instead of scraping out a can of chili, I sat in the studio with the Chairman and the host of the classical show, who loved Mozart and hated me, since we once dated the same woman. I could romance her in Spanish. Whenever the classical music host would ask a question, there was a crash, as if the Chairman of the Party brought his own cymbals to the interview. My head clanged in my headphones. The host who loved Mozart said to the Chairman of the Party: *Sir, your necklace of bullets keeps swinging into the microphone. Could you please remove it?* The Chairman of the Party laid his necklace of bullets on the table next to me. I thought about snatching the necklace of bullets and dashing out the door to pawn it for a month's rent. I remembered the bodyguards, glowering in the doorway.

The next day, there was a knock on the door. The fire marshal must be back. At the door stood a diminutive man who collected cars. I confessed everything, the spiderwebs spreading across the steering wheel, the dandelions growing from the engine block, the exhaust pipe snapped off and twisted up like a rusty Dutch pretzel in the back seat, the kind I would microwave frozen and devour by the box. *I don't care. All I want is the body*, he said. *That's a 1968 Camaro. I'll give you two hundred dollars for it, and I'll tow it away.* The diminutive man who collected cars towed away my car and left me two hundred-dollar bills, two months' rent, better than sizzling rice soup, better than a can of chili, better than the egg rolls from Tony's Chop Suey, better than stealing a necklace of bullets.



**Martín Espada** has published more than 20 books as a poet, editor, essayist and translator. His new book of poems from Norton is called "Floaters," winner of the 2021 National Book Award. Other books of poems include "Vivas to Those Who Have Failed" (2016), "The Trouble Ball" (2011), "The Republic of Poetry" (2006) and "Alabanza" (2003). He is the editor of "What Saves Us: Poems of Empathy and Outrage in the Age of Trump" (2019). He has received the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, the Shelley Memorial Award, the Robert Creeley Award, an Academy of American Poets Fellowship, the PEN/Revson

Fellowship and a Guggenheim Fellowship. "The Republic of Poetry" was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. The title poem of his collection "Alabanza," about 9/11, has been widely anthologized and performed. His book of essays and poems, "Zapata's Disciple" (1998), was banned in Tucson as part of the Mexican-American Studies Program outlawed by the state of Arizona, and reissued by Northwestern. A former tenant lawyer in Greater Boston, Espada is a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.