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Another Nameless Prostitute Says the Man in Innocent

Martín Espada
Grand Valley State University

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A lawyer by training, Martín Espada is currently Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where he teaches courses on Pablo Neruda and on poetry of the Americas. Espada has authored six volumes of verse and a collection of essays, *Zapata's Disciple*. He has also edited two major anthologies of poetry, *El Coro: A Chorus of Latino and Latina Poets*, and *Poetry Like Bread: Poets of the Political Imagination*. His most recent book of poems is entitled *A Mayan Astronomer in Hell's Kitchen*. The first of the two poems reprinted here is taken from this collection. The second is the title-poem of Espada's 1996 book *Imagine the Angels of Bread*. We thank Professor Espada for permission to reprint these poems.

Author's Note: Mumia Abu-Jamal is a radical African-American journalist on death row, convicted in the 1981 slaying of a police officer in Philadelphia—under extremely dubious circumstances. There is a movement to win him a new trial.

In April 1997, NPR's All Things Considered first commissioned, then refused to air, the following poem, due to its subject matter and political sympathies.

Another Nameless Prostitute Says the Man is Innocent —for Mumia Abu-jamal

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania/Camden, New Jersey, April 1997

The board-blinded windows knew what happened;
the pavement sleepers of Philadelphia, groaning
in their ghost-infested sleep, knew what happened;
every Black man blessed
with the gashed eyebrow of nightsticks
knew what happened;
even Walt Whitman knew what happened,
poet a century dead, keeping vigil
from the tomb on the other side of the bridge.

More than fifteen years ago,
the cataract stare of the cruiser's headlights,
the impossible angle of the bullet,
the tributaries and lakes of blood,
Officer Faulkner dead, suspect Mumia shot in the chest,
the witnesses who saw a gunman
running away, his heart and feet thudding.

The nameless prostitutes know,
hunched at the curb, their bare legs chilled.
Their faces squinted to see that night,
rouged with fading bruises. Now the faces fade.
Perhaps an eyewitness putrifies eyes open in a bed of soil, or floats in
the warm gulf stream of her addiction,
or hides from the fanged whispers of the police
in the tomb of Walt Whitman,
where the granite door is open
and fugitive slaves may rest.

Mumia: the Panther beret, the thinking dreadlocks,
dissident words that swarmed the microphone like a hive,
sharing meals with people named Africa,
calling out their names even after the police bombardment
that charred their Black bodies.
So the governor has signed the death warrant.
The executioner's needle would flush the poison
down into Mumia's writing hand
so the fingers curl like a burned spider;
his calm questioning mouth would grow numb,
and everywhere radios sputter to silence, in his memory.

The veiled prostitutes are gone,
gone to the segregated balcony of whores.
But the newspaper reports that another nameless prostitute
says the man is innocent, that she will testify at the next hearing.
Beyond the courthouse, a multitude of witnesses chants, prays, shouts
for his prison to collapse, a shack in a hurricane.

Mumia, if the last nameless prostitute
becomes an unraveling turban of steam,
if the judges' robes become clouds of ink
swirling like octopus deception,
if the shroud becomes your Amish quilt,
if your dreadlocks are snipped during autopsy,
then drift above the ruined RCA factory
that once birthed radios
to the tomb of Walt Whitman,
where the granite door is open
and fugitive slaves may rest.