Martín Espada

You Got a Song, Man

For Robert Creeley (1926-2005)

You told me the son of Acton's town nurse would never cross the border into Concord, where the Revolution left great houses standing on Main Street. Yet we crossed into Concord, walking through Sleepy Hollow Cemetery to greet Thoreau, his stone stamped with the word *Henry* jutting like a gray thumbnail down the path from Emerson and his boulder of granite. We remembered Henry's night in jail, refusing tax for the Mexican War, and I could see you hunched with him, loaning Henry a cigarette, explaining the perpetual wink of your eve lost after the windshield burst in your boyhood face. When Emerson arrived to ask what you and Henry were doing in there, you would say: You got a song, man, sing it. You got a bell, man, ring it.

You hurried off to Henry in his cell before the trees could bring their flowers back to Sleepy Hollow.
You sent your last letter months ago about the poems you could not write, no words to sing when the president swears that God breathes the psalms of armies in his ear, and flags twirl by the millions to fascinate us like dogs at the dinner table. You apologized for what you could not say,

as if the words were missing teeth you searched for with your tongue, and then a poem flashed across the page, breaking news of music interrupting news of war: You got a song, man, sing it. You got a bell, man, ring it.

Today you died two thousand miles from Sleepy Hollow, somewhere near the border with Mexico, the territory Thoreau wandered only in jailhouse sleep.

Your lungs folded their wings in a land of drought and barbed wire, boxcars swaying intoxicated at 4 AM and unexplained lights hovering in the desert. You said: There's a lot of places out there, friend, so you would go, smuggling a suitcase of words across every border carved by the heel of mapmakers or conquerors, because you had an all-night conversation with the world, hearing the beat of unsung poems in every voice, visiting the haunted rooms in every face. Drive, you said, because poets must bring the news to the next town:

You got a song, man, sing it.

You got a bell, man, ring it.