Alabanza: New and Selected Poems 1982-2002
MARTÍN ESPADA
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Praise" is the English translation of Alabanza, Martín Espada's first career-spanning collection of poetry, encompassing six books published over more than three decades and including a selection of new poems, previously unpublished. Alabanza is a perfect title for this collection: Espada often uses the form of the ode to praise and give witness to the lives of the working class and the poor, so often forgotten or passed over by history. He also uses the same form to explore the contours of his own life, and his family's.

Whatever his subject, for Espada to praise is a deeply political act: It may be the only appropriate means of witnessing the lives of those on the margins without turning them into mere clichés or markers for political rhetoric.

Espada’s concerns with history and politics probably have a more complex origin, but an understanding of his biography and ideas provides some illumination on the subject. Brought up in Brooklyn, New York, by working-class Puerto Rican immigrants, Espada has worked as a tenant lawyer and is now a professor at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. He has won numerous prestigious awards, including the PEN/Revson Fellowship and the Paterson Poetry Prize. In an interview with William Barillas in the September/October 2003 issue of The Bloomsbury Review, Espada argued that “political poetry … accurately reflects the way poor or working-class people live, [it] reflects the racial dynamic in this country.”

What is political, though, may surprise readers. For instance, with the poem “Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100,” Espada offers an ode to the lives of the 43 hotel and restaurant employees working at the Windows on the World restaurant who lost their lives on September 11, 2001:

Praise Manhattan from a hundred and seven flights up, like Atlantis glimpsed through the windows of an ancient aquarium.
Praise the great windows where immigrants from the kitchen could squat and almost see their world, hear the chant of nations:
Ecuador, México, República Dominicana, Haiti, Yemen, Ghana, Bangladesh.

Here Espada does what few news commentators on CNN or elsewhere have done: praise the working-class and poor who died when the World Trade Center collapsed. What did they do that deserves praise? Nothing more than the ordinary heroism of the immigrant’s daily life: They showed up for work, they covered the shifts of sick coworkers, they worked to feed families in their home countries. But the poem is more than a simple summation of their activities that day. Espada writes that “after the shudder deep in the glass of the great windows … /for a time the stoves glowed in darkness like the lighthouse in Fajardo/like a cook’s soul.” Why “soul”? Espada continues, angry, spiteful:
Soul I say, even if the dead cannot tell us
About the bristles of God’s beard because God has no face,
Alabanza gives us an intimate view into the artistic evolution of one of our most notable poets, showing how Espada has taken the form of the ode and transformed the idea of praise into a political act. But it is pathos and the ability to communicate it in universal tones that are the greatest gifts of this deeply loving poet.

REVIEWER: Cristian Salazar is a contributing editor to The Bloomsbury Review, edits for MovieMaker Magazine, and eats by farming his writing skills out to various publications. He now lives in Brooklyn, NY.