

“From Life’s School of War”: A Review of Martín Espada’s Vivas to Those Who Have Failed

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Vivas to Those Who Have Failed: Poems, by Martín Espada, W. W. Norton & Company, 2016, 96p, hardcover \$25.95.

IN AN AGE OF POLITICAL HYPERBOLE that relies on the discourse of failure to discourage and demoralize in its attempts to usher in a more ruthless futurity of “greatness,” there are those who would argue that to invest in poetry would prove an unsuccessful bid to produce “value.” And while it may be tempting to interpret at first blush a poetry volume that appears from its title to embrace forfeiture and align itself with such defeatist rhetoric, Martín Espada’s tenth book of previously unpublished verse, *Vivas to Those Who Have Failed*, is anything but. Instead, with its recurring nods to Walt Whitman’s vision of an unrealized democracy, Espada in this tightly wrought collection makes a bold proclamation to invite one of the modern era’s most hated of all four-letter words, “hope,” and with that focused vision carve out a decided space for the potential of what can be imagined to become possible.

Remaining true to Whitman’s invocation from “Song of Myself” (as borrowed by Espada for his book’s title) that calls for an equal recognition of the “numberless unknown heroes” alongside history’s more famous players, many of the characters in the lyrical poems of *Vivas* are not household names. Accordingly, even as these characters’ actions from a historical standpoint may appear to be “unknown” or “unrealized” by the larger population, Espada makes clear in these latest poems that such “failure” itself is a hermeneutic process that rises above the neoliberalized mantra of futility to offer a new perspective of *what is possible* and *what can be achieved*, a progression as necessary to and dependent upon the cycle of change as the ideas that first drove the attempts to

alter unjust realities. And this is where the sophistication of the volume’s title is realized fully for the way in which it relies, stylistically and structurally, on the clever bookending of “*Vivas*”—as a cry of celebration, of vitality, of life—on one end, and “Failed” on the other, signaling Whitman’s own dialectic preoccupations with a regenerative life cycle that ultimately depends upon “failure,” not as the moment of stultification, but as the necessary gateway to new possibility (as in the progressive cycle of thesis/antithesis=synthesis).

Evidence of this cyclical attention (more than can be documented in the confines of this review) abounds across the five sections of the book. A powerful example of which manifests in section two, “Heal the Cracks in the Bell of the World,” a series of poems that balance narratives of social violence with rally cries for social justice. While the title poem of this section, a mournful response to the horrific tragedy of the Newtown elementary school shooting of 2013, is grounded in what has now become, regrettably, the almost commonplace phenomenon of American school shooting violence, the poem “How We Could Have Lived or Died this Way” (that earlier appeared in *NAR*’s bicentennial edition) broadens the analytical scope of institutional violence to include a poignant and defiant condemnation of our present-day political reality that allows Espada to connect the historical legacy of police brutality against minority communities with the recent spate of police-driven killings, primarily those that have targeted black males and resulted in the formation of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Inasmuch as section two finds the poet reimagining the potential of a world where munitions are refashioned into church bells, as we see in “Heal the Cracks,” he also demands, with righteous indignation, that

we confront serious questions about our role and responsibility in challenging state violence so that the poetic statement “How We Could Have Lived . . .” used in the poem’s title is rephrased into a question of activism and commitment: “How *could* we have lived or died this way?”

Ultimately, *Vivas* is a book of transformation and calls upon the transformative power associated with personal and political change to drive its narrative. Though it can be argued that *Vivas* extends many of the familiar Espada thematic concerns outlined in his more than thirty-year body of work, *Vivas* nonetheless stands apart as a unique artistic manifestation of an Espada transformed by the realities he confronts, including, but not limited by, his father’s passing. Most importantly, as with Whitman’s metonymic grass, Espada leverages his closing section “*El Morivivi*” to similar effect to not only personify the life of Frank Espada, but to suggest more broadly, in linkage with the book’s title, that what lives, dies (read: “fails”)—but it also has the capacity to live again. Espada reminds us of this crucial message throughout *Vivas*: as with humanity, so too, our political reality. This is a volume of significant artistic evolution for Espada: “From life’s school of war” he has (re)emerged, certainly tested by several of the events captured in this collection and altered by what could have killed him, but as the Nietzschean maxim follows, with poems made stronger by and for it. *Vivas* therefore signals the moment in Espada’s career when metaphor meets perfectly with metamorphosis, as he assumes fully the Whitmanian mantle and his poetics moves beyond political imagination to social consciousness, activism gives way to pedagogy, and the people’s poet becomes the national conscience. □