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

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In an age of political hyperbole—(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, as the Nietzschean maxim follows, with a question of activism and commitment: “How could we have lived or died this way?”). Ultimately, Vivas is a book of 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 Moriviví” 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.