

Wake Up, Mario

For Mario González Arenales (1994-2021)

MARTÍN ESPADA

He's not doing anything wrong. He's just scaring my wife.

—call to the Alameda Police Department, April 19, 2021

They watched him from the window of the house, a man at the fence in a crooked wool cap, chipping at their tree with a comb, liquor bottles in a shopping basket by his feet. They heard him speak to the wife's mother in the yard, tongue thick in his mouth, heavy with lamentation. He could be the Aztec god of pestilence, no mask, breathing the plague on them through walls and doors. The Mexican nanny might be able to read the hieroglyphics tumbling from his mouth, but she was wheeling a stroller through the streets of Alameda, the trees bowing deeply.

On the news, the body-cam clip wobbles like the video at a barbecue. The cops are cheerful as they encircle him in the park across the street. He says his name is Mario. One cop scolds this refugee from Oakland about *drinking in our parks*, wants ID so they can be *on our merry way*. Mario says: *Merry-go-round?* He steps up on a tree stump as if to ride it. The cops climb off the spinning horses of Mario's imagination, tugging at his arms as he peeks at them under the cap. Now they are cowboys at the rodeo, but Mario is not a steer, crashing to the applause of hands that would carve him into steaks.

The cops shove him to the ground, facedown. Mario squirms and bucks; he is the prize at the county fair, a beast who tries to calm his captors, so he spits all the words he knows to make them stop: *oh God, please, thank you, and sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I forgive you*, says one cop, as the other cop digs his knee into Mario's back, where it stays even after they cuff him, even after the first cop says: *Think we can roll him on his side?* He asks Mario for his birthday, as if there will be a barbecue in the backyard at the cop's house, and Mario, facedown in the wood chips and the dirt, with the other cop's knee pressing into his back, wheezes the word: 1994.

There were cries, then silence. There were no last words. In medieval days, the prisoner at the block would forgive the headsman and drop a coin into his hand for a clean strike of the blade. In Salem's Puritan days, a man accused of witchcraft, after two days of stones stacked on him, sneered: *More weight*.

There were no last words from Mario when they rolled him over at last. The last words were in the headlines that same day, jury deliberations two thousand miles away in Minneapolis, the case of a cop kneeling on the neck of a Black man, facedown and handcuffed, for nine minutes.

In Alameda, the cops began CPR and their incantation over the asphyxiated body: *Wake up, Mario, wake up*, as if he would be late for school on class picture day, as if he would miss his shift at the pizzeria where the paychecks dwindled away, as if he had an autistic brother waiting at home for Mario to help him step from the shower, button his shirt, comb his hair. His autistic brother still waits for Mario.

The man who called the cops, his wife's hand gripping his shoulder, says *We greatly regret what happened and never intended*, says *Terrible things are being said about us*, says *Our autistic child is able to read and is terribly sensitive*. The sign in front of the dark house says: *For Sale*.

The merry-go-round in Mario's imagination grinds on, creaking day after day: the caller who presses the button to make the horses go, the cops charging like cavalry after the renegade, the dead man galloping ahead, escape impossible, his horse impaled on a pole, kicking the air.

The Mexican nanny called Crucita blames herself for rolling the stroller back too late. She visits the altar for Mario across the street from the tree missing a sliver of bark from his comb. The roses wreathing his face shrivel to plastic, balloons gone flat, votive candles cold. There is an autopsy after the autopsy. The coroner keeps the city's secrets, a priest hiding in the confessional.

In her sleep, Crucita sees Mario, sometimes a body splayed across the street, breath squeezed from his lungs like the last note from the pipes of a calliope, sometimes breaking free, the painted horse lunging away, as he rides along the coast to the deserts of Baja California, down mountain trails off the maps of Yanqui generals and their armies, deep into the songs about bandidos too clever to be caught, revolutionaries the bullets cannot kill.

About the Poem

On April 19, 2021, Mario González died after being restrained by Alameda, California police. González was intoxicated, yet unarmed and nonthreatening; officers pinned him face down for approximately five minutes, weight on his back, till he became unresponsive. This police homicide occurred on the same day deliberations began in the Derek Chauvin trial. Lawyers for the family have now filed a wrongful death claim against the city of Alameda. A friend connected to the case contributed first-hand knowledge to the poem. The poem is also based on review of the police body cam video. González left behind a young son and an autistic brother.

About the Author

Martín Espada has published more than twenty books as a poet, editor, essayist and translator. His latest book of poems is called *Floaters*, winner of the 2021 National Book Award and a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. Other books of poems include *Vivas to Those Who Have Failed* (2016), *The Trouble Ball* (2011), *The Republic of Poetry* (2006) and *Alabanza* (2003). He is the editor of *What Saves Us: Poems of Empathy and Outrage in the Age of Trump* (2019). He has received the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, the Shelley Memorial Award, the Robert Creeley Award, an Academy of American Poets Fellowship, the PEN/Revson Fellowship, a Letras Boricuas Fellowship and a Guggenheim Fellowship. *The Republic of Poetry* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. The title poem of his collection *Alabanza*, about 9/11, has been widely anthologized and performed. His book of essays and poems, *Zapata's Disciple* (1998), was banned in Tucson as part of the Mexican-American Studies Program outlawed by the state of Arizona. A former tenant lawyer in Greater Boston, Espada is a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. <http://www.martinespada.net/>

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