

Alabanza By Martin Espada

for the 43 members of Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Local 100, working at the Windows on the World restaurant, who lost their lives in the attack on the World Trade Center

Alabanza. Praise the cook with a shaven head and a tattoo on his shoulder that said Oye, a blue-eyed Puerto Rican with people from Fajardo, the harbor of pirates centuries ago. Praise the lighthouse in Fajardo, candle glimmering white to worship the dark saint of the sea.

Alabanza. Praise the cook's yellow Pirates cap worn in the name of Roberto Clemente, his plane that flamed into the ocean loaded with cans for Nicaragua, for all the mouths chewing the ash of earthquakes.

Alabanza. Praise the kitchen radio, dial clicked even before the dial on the oven, so that music and Spanish rose before bread. Praise the bread. Alabanza.

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 squint and almost see their world, hear the chant of nations:

Ecuador, México, Republica Dominicana, Haiti, Yemen, Ghana, Bangladesh.

Alabanza. Praise the kitchen in the morning, where the gas burned blue on every stove and exhaust fans fired their diminutive propellers, hands cracked eggs with quick thumbs or sliced open cartons to build an altar of cans.

Alabanza. Praise the busboy's music, the chime-chime of his dishes and silverware in the tub.

Alabanza. Praise the dish-dog, the dishwasher who worked that morning because another dishwasher could not stop coughing, or because he needed overtime to pile the sacks of rice and beans for a family floating away on some Caribbean island plagued by frogs. Alabanza. Praise the waitress who heard the radio in the kitchen and sang to herself about a man gone. Alabanza.

After the thunder wilder than thunder,
after the shudder deep in the glass of the great windows,
after the radio stopped singing like a tree full of terrified frogs,
after night burst the dam of day and flooded the kitchen,
for a time the stoves glowed in darkness like the lighthouse in Fajardo,
like a cook's soul. Soul I say, even if the dead cannot tell us
about the bristles of God's beard because God has no face,
soul I say, to name the smoke-beings flung in constellations
across the night sky of this city and cities to come.
Alabanza I say, even if God has no face.

Alabanza. When the war began, from Manhattan and Kabul
two constellations of smoke rose and drifted to each other,
mingling in icy air, and one said with an Afghan tongue:
Teach me to dance. We have no music here.
And the other said with a Spanish tongue:
I will teach you. Music is all we have.