

# Who Burns for the Perfection of Paper

By Martín Espada

At sixteen, I worked after high school hours  
at a printing plant  
that manufactured legal pads:  
Yellow paper  
stacked seven feet high  
and leaning  
as I slipped cardboard  
between the pages,  
then brushed red glue  
up and down the stack.  
No gloves: fingertips required  
for the perfection of paper,  
smoothing the exact rectangle.  
Sluggish by 9 PM, the hands  
would slide along suddenly sharp paper,  
and gather slits thinner than the crevices  
of the skin, hidden.  
Then the glue would sting,  
hands oozing  
till both palms burned  
at the punchclock.

Ten years later, in law school,  
I knew that every legal pad  
was glued with the sting of hidden cuts,  
that every open lawbook  
was a pair of hands  
upturned and burning.

Martin Espada, "Who Burns for the Perfection of Paper" from *City of Coughing and Dead Radiators*.  
Copyright © 1993 by Martin Espada. Used by permission of the author W. W. Norton & Company,  
Inc.

Source: *City of Coughing and Dead Radiators* (W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1993)