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.


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