

Blasphemy

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Martín Espada's most recent collection of poems is "The Trouble Ball." He is a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

Sam Hamill was born in 1942 or 1943 to unknown parents. Adopted and raised in Utah, he was beaten and abused, a runaway, a petty thief, a heroin user, in trouble with the law, in and out of jail.

In the poem "Plain Dumb Luck," he writes of being "huddled in a cell in Fredonia, Arizona/ rolling cigarettes from a Bull Durham pouch/ locked up for the crime of being fourteen and homeless." A sheriff tells him to "Go home, son," but he would "rather steal than taste that belt again." And yet, by poem's end, 40 years later, the poet concludes that he is "the luckiest son-of-a-bitch alive." It was his "dumb luck" to discover poetry. From the practice of poetry everything else would flow.

In the words of Hayden Carruth, "No one — I mean no one — has done the momentous work of presenting poetry better than Sam Hamill. His editing and publishing, his criticism and translations, his own very strong and beautiful poems have been making a difference in American culture for many years."

This poem is dedicated to him.

Blasphemy For Sam Hamill

Let the blasphemy be spoken: poetry can save us,
not the way a fisherman pulls the drowning swimmer
into his boat, not the way Jesus, between screams,
promised life everlasting to the thief crucified beside him
on the hill, but salvation nevertheless.

Somewhere a convict sobs into a book of poems
from the prison library, and I know why
his hands are careful not to break the brittle pages.