

Martín Espada

**Not Here**

*for Raúl Zurita*  
*Santiago de Chile, July 2004*

The other poets tell me he tried to blind himself,  
taped his eyelids and splashed his face with ammonia.

What Zurita saw gnawed like a parasite at the muscles in his eyes:  
Chile's warships invaded the harbor of Valparaíso  
and subversives staggered at gunpoint  
through the city of hills down to the dock.  
Only the water knows how many  
faded away like black boots tossed into a black sea,  
or dangled from the masts, beaten by knuckles and rain  
into scarecrows the seagulls would pluck.

September 11, 1973: Zurita's heart  
crashed deep in the ribs of a Navy ship.  
The officer in charge of interrogation  
shook the poet's papers and fumed: *This is not poetry.*  
The other poets tell me: *Electricity was involved.*

Seven years later, Zurita blinked  
to save his eyes, and wrote:  
*In the name of our love let even*  
*the steel-toed boots*  
*that kicked us be loved,*  
*and those who mocking us said*  
*"Do a little dance for us" and put out their cigarettes*  
*on our arms so we would dance for them,*  
*for our love's sake, for that alone*  
*let them now dance.*

Today we walk through the courtyard  
of the presidential palace.  
The fountain speaks in the water's tongue;  
the fountain of smoke is gone.

The bombers that boomed across this sky  
left no fingerprints in the clouds  
when they dropped their rockets,  
twisting the rails of the balcony like licorice.  
Today Allende is white marble outside the palace,  
mute as a martyr, without a hand free to wave  
from the balcony, without a voice to crackle  
his last words in the radio air.

Zurita says: *After the bombing, after the coup,*  
*no one could stand here to look at the ruins.*  
*If you did, you were suspect. Did you grieve for Allende?*  
They grieved, heads down, hands in pockets, moving along,  
glancing up, a blackened balcony in the corner of the eye.  
Zurita knows what the water knows,  
what the sky will not confess even to the gods  
who switch the electricity on, off, then on again.  
Zurita's beard is forged in gray, the steel of a Navy ship.  
He lights a cigarette for those who would see the ruins  
where the ruins have been swept away.

I am the one navigating the night without stars.  
On or around the night of September 11, 1973,  
at the age of sixteen,  
I was vandalizing a golf course in the rain,  
fishtailing my car through the mud on the ninth hole  
as beer cans rolled under my feet.  
Ten miles away, at the White House,  
the plotters were pleased; the coup  
was a world in miniature they painted by hand,  
a train with real smoke and bells  
circling the track in the basement.  
The rest of us drank too much, drove too fast,  
as the radio told us what happened  
on the other side of the world  
and the windshield wipers said  
*not here, not here, not here.*