

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.