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Rain without Rain: Isla Negra, Chile, July 2004

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RAIN WITHOUT RAIN
Isla Negra, Chile, July 2004

by Martín Espada

The celebration of a century since Neruda's birth
brings pilgrims by the thousands to his house,
fingering the rust off the locomotive in his garden,
shouting Whitman in Spanish over the sea,
loading their shoes with Isla Negra sand
amid the red banners along the beach,
men on horseback, a chorus of schoolgirls,
bamboo flutes from the south.

Yet there is rain without rain in the air.
In the horseshoe path of the poet's tomb
they walk, lips sewn up by the seamstress grief,
faces of the disappeared on signs strung
around their necks: *Name. Date. Political Execution.*
The faces of the missing in snapshots are pins
brilliant in the sky, long after their bodies
float away to another cosmos.
Some wore jackets and ties for the journey;
one blinked with the camera's flash, shutting his eyes forever.

Thirty years ago the dictator
flicked a white-gloved hand
and the disappeared were gone:
Tape across the eyes, wires clamped to toes and genitals,
rats in the anus, a human ear in the soup.
Executioners hid the bones away
like dogs pawing at the soil.

Now the circle speaks at the poet's tomb:
my brother, my sister, my uncle, my cousin.
*Give us the bones for the coffin,
give us the coffin for the grave,
give us the grave for the gravestone,
give us the gravestone so we can sleep.*

Fingertips tilt the faces of the dead,
the family nose like three cloves of garlic,
mouth bent in a grin mysterious as a magician's spoon.

A girl, ten years old, wears the picture of a boy,
also ten, wandered off long ago into the dictator's carnival.
This is my uncle, she says. I never met him.
Then she recites Neruda, too softly, too quickly,
because her uncle should be there
to steer her shoulder and whisper: *Louder. Slower.*
How the *desaparecidos* on this day
burst from the sand at Isla Negra,
how they are born from the black petals of the rocks,
how they wade from a sea far away
where their bones glow with the light of blind fish.

At the tomb, a woman silent all along
steps from the circle and says:
I want to sing. Neruda. Poem Twenty.
Then she climbs atop the tomb and sings:
Tonight I can write the saddest verses.