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The Room

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Carolyn Wright

THE ROOM

She stood in the room where Allende died.
It was two months later,
Armistice Day, 1973,
and she was on a package tour
for which all refunds had been cancelled.
Below the bombed-out windows
with their twisted grillework,
Pinochet's troops patrolled the streets,
and she wore a scarlet poppy
for that other war—Flanders Field
and the black-edged telegram
that had stopped her father's face
in its frame on the mantelpiece.

For years she would not tell this story:
how she walked through Santiago's
rubble-strewn streets until soldiers
leaped from a van with naked bayonets
and surrounded her, ripping her camera
from her shoulder. All afternoon in the *cuartel*
she showed them blurry Polaroids
of palm trees and big hotels,
and told them she knew nothing.
She wasn't working for anyone.
As late sun slanted through the one window's
iron bars, the *comandante* suddenly
relented. "We have something special
to show you." His tone said
You'd better not refuse.

A guard led her through cratered beds
and shattered statuary of the garden,

into the high-ceilinged room
already beginning to fill with twilight.

Everything was as they had left it.
She gazed a long time
at the red plush chair,
the heavy desk with bullet marks,
scorched books piled knee-deep
on the floor.

“Communist books,”
the guard said, shifting
the rifle on his shoulder.
There was a battered telephone
on the desktop, and a letter
handwritten in Spanish,
the fountain pen lying across it
where the words trailed off.

She knew no Spanish.
The guard stepped to the window.
She wanted to take the letter
or engrave it in her thoughts
for her friends outside, but the guard
turned back and there was no way
she could go beyond this warning.
She studied the prescription bottle
by the inkwell: nitroglycerin
he took for his congested heart.
On the floor under the sideboard
a whiskey bottle on its side, cracked open,
a spill of dark residue beside it.
“*El Presidente* liked his booze,”
the guard smirked, as if
that justified everything.

Her eyes had been saving the blood
for last. In the failing light

the dark stains stood out black—
his last call to his wife,
his farewell to Chile on the radio
when he knew they were coming for him.
Spatter on the walls still echoing
the burst door, the rifle barrels
raised, automatic fire going on and on.
Vanishing in shadow the pool
of himself into which he fell.

Outside, wail of the curfew sirens,
footsteps of those who could be shot
on sight for delaying. “Don’t worry,
we escort you back,” the guard said.
“We know how to treat our friends.”

For years she would feel the click
of the safety catch, chill of steel
at her temple, the poppy’s crimson
deepening on her breast.
She said *No thank you*
and walked out.
If soldiers tried to stop her
she would turn and face them
as she still wanted to believe
he had.

for Margaret Gibson, R.N.