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Now the Dead Will Dance the Mambo

Achill Island, Ireland, June 2000

Last night the shadow of a cloud rolled off the bare mountain
like a shawl slipping from the shoulder of a giant.
Shirts on the clothesline sagged in rain.
We burned turf, fists of earth blackening in the fireplace,
room full of poets' books leaning rumped, half-asleep.
All night a radio sang in Irish, tongues sod-hard with lament
or celebration. Then the BBC news, and the announcer's lips
pinching the name: *Tito Puente, The Mambo King, dead in New York.*

I would listen to Tito's records and see my father years ago:
black hair shiny as the spinning disk, combed slick
before the dance. I learned to spy on his mambo step,
drummed the pots and kitchen tables of Brooklyn.
I saw Tito Puente too, hammering timbales on the Jazzboat
in Boston Harbor, brandishing drumsticks overhead
to scatter the malevolent spirits that grabbed at his hair.
Guadalupe pushed backstage to return with Tito's drumstick,
splintered from repeating, always repeating the beat of slaves.
Here, on this island, I rehearse the Irish word for drum:
bodhrán, gripped by hand like the pandereta,
circle of skin and wood for the grandchildren of slaves
to thump as they sang the news in Ponce, Puerto Rico.

Again today the rain grays the graying stones.
We shake away drizzle in the pub dwarfed by mountains.

In brown Guinness light we squint to see
the posters of their Easter dead: James Connolly
bellowing insurrection to the Citizen Army,
the year 1916 ablaze above his head, numbers torched
like the pillars of an empire's monuments to itself.
The bartender says Connolly eyed the firing squad
strapped to a chair in the stonebreakers' yard,
gangrene feasting on his wound so he could not stand.
I tell the bartender that Puerto Rico has its Easter dead:
a march on Palm Sunday, colonial police intoxicated
by the incense of gunsmoke, Cadets of the Republic
painting slogans on the street in their belly-blood.
That was Ponce in 1937, and Rafael still says:
My mother left in a white dress and came home in a red dress.

Tito Puente is dead, and we are in a pub on Achill Island
plundering the jukebox, flipping between the Wolfe Tones
and the Dubliners till we discover Tito's *Oye Como Va*.
The beat is a hand slapping the bar, heads nodding
as if their ears funneled a chant of *yes-yes, yes-yes*,
and when we shoot a game of pool in his memory
the table becomes a dance floor at the Palladium,
cue ball spinning through a crowd of red and green.
Now James Connolly could dance the mambo,
gangrene forever banished from his leg.