

## Something Escapes the Bonfire

*For Victor and Joan Jara*

### *I. Because We Will Never Die: June 1969*

Victor sang his peasant's prayer:

*Levántate, y mírate las manos.*

Stand up and look at your hands,  
gloved in hard skin, the hands of Victor's father  
petrified into fists steering the plow.  
Estadio Chile cheered, delirious as a man  
who knows he has plowed his last field  
for someone else, who hears a song telling him  
what he knows with the back of his neck.

Joan, the dancer, who twirled before crowds  
at the same shantytowns where Victor sang,  
leaned forward in her seat to hear it:

*First Prize at the New Song festival for Victor Jara.*

These are the nights we do not sleep  
because we will never die.

How then could he squint into the dark,  
somewhere beyond the back row, raise his guitar,  
and sing: *We'll go together, united by blood,  
now and in the hour of our death. Amen.*

### *II. The Man With All the Guns: September 1973*

The coup came, and soldiers whipped the enemies of the state,  
hands on head and single file, through the stadium gates.

Condemned faces bled their light in the halls  
of Estadio Chile. The light floats there still.

The killers had their light too, spectral cigarettes  
glimmering in every corridor, especially the Prince,  
or so the prisoners called the blond officer  
who smiled at his work as if churches sang in his head.

When Victor slipped into the hallway,

away from thousands gripping knees to chest  
as they awaited the cigarette in the neck  
or stared back at the staring machineguns,  
he met the Prince, who must have heard singing in his head,  
since he recognized the singer's face, strummed the air  
and slashed a finger across his throat.  
The Prince smiled like a man with all the guns.

Later, when the other prisoners realized  
there were no wings on their shoulders  
to fly them from the firing squad,  
Victor sang *Venceremos*, we will win,  
and the banned anthem lifted shoulders  
as the Prince's face reddened in a scream.  
If his own scream could not quiet the song  
pulsing through the veins in his head,  
reasoned the Prince, then the machineguns would.

### *III. If Only Victor: July 2004*

Crack the face of every clock at Estadio Chile.  
In this place, thirty-one years are measured  
by Victor's last breath. A moment,  
as in *momento*, the last word of the last canto  
he wrote before the bullets swarmed  
into the honeycomb of his lungs.

Her eyes still burn. Her tongue still freezes.  
Again for Joan the helicopters roar,  
military music drums across the dial,  
soldiers rifle-butt women in the bread line.  
Again she finds her husband's body in the morgue  
amid the corpses piled like laundry  
and lifts his dangling fractured hands in hers  
as if to begin a waltz.

Yes, now they have named the stadium where he was killed for him;  
yes, his words flow in stone across the wall of the lobby;  
yes, there are Chinese acrobats tumbling here tonight;

yet she would rip away the sign flourishing his name,  
hammer down the wall of his words  
and scatter the acrobats into the streets  
if only Victor would walk into the room  
to finish their argument about why  
he moved so slowly in the morning  
that he almost always made her late for class.

*IV. Something Escapes the Bonfire: July 2004*

South of Santiago, far from Estadio Victor Jara,  
under a tent where the spikes of rain rattle off the canvas,  
a boy and girl born years after the coup  
lean across a chair onstage to fill their eyes with each other's faces.  
The tape rumbles, and Victor's voice  
spirals delicate as burnt paper to the ceiling,  
singing of a lover's silence to the dancers  
who uncurl the tendrils of their bodies.

Something escapes the bonfire  
where the generals warm their hands,  
embers from burnt paper, buried tapes,  
voices teeming in the silence  
like the invisible creatures in a glass of water,  
how a dancer spins to the music in her head,  
alone but for the tingle of fingertips at her elbow.