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Interrogation Palace

How easy in those days to chance upon
a ruined palace: down the Calle or paseo
& a gate would loom before us

with its granite bulk, windows shattered since before
the Franco years, & always the colonies
of feral cats slinking ironwork, hissing their

protracted wars. For example, the palacio

just off the Retiro subway stop: passed so often
you could name each mangy form
that slithered from its rubble:

Juan Carlos & Bunuel, Sor Juana the Tail-less
& jet-black Federico with his
Gypsy swagger. **Castillo de Gatos:**

night time we could hear the screeches,

battles & the guttural pleas from heat.

What were we doing here, having stumbled
on a country & its capital, a tongue we spoke

indifferently, no longer young enough
to harbor delusion? But harbor it we did.
Sickness & phrase books, the dollar in free fall

& Goya's Saturn swallowing

our every good intention. So all that winter
you read Chekhov as a charm against the shakes
& named the vagrant cats. Our apartment faced

the station of the Guardia Civil, its window
looking out upon a floor of bright lit rooms
where interrogations took place, khaki figures

circling men in street clothes splayed on chairs.

Nights of questions posed 'till dawn, in silence
from a square of light, glimpsed from yet
another window, itself glimpsed inside memory.

& you? Every atom which composed you
now is gone, but still a uniform sips coffee
& the bearded man upon the chair contorts his neck,

Swaying to the movement of his questioners,

who circle as another man & a woman watch this
from within their private supplications, prayers
to ward off alcohol & heroin, the slow

corrosion of a marriage still not ended with
your dying. & the questions still rain down:
everyone's in custody & no one is prepared yet

to confess. The uniform sips coffee,

the uniform keeps pacing & the four & twenty
windows face us from the ruins as we prowl them
& must answer the choir-ing snarls, each

burning pair of eyes, with sounds returning
every question back against itself, each
raised arm which seeks to query or protect.

& how long did we stand within this brightness,

or peer toward it from somewhere in the outer dark,
where I remain inside the questions and retorts,
the spotlights & the toppled battlements,

this panic to scurry toward any sort of shadow?
O phantom, o sphinx, o tigress & annihilating muse,
before you rend me grant me one last chance

to answer rightly. This time I will not fail you.