



11-15-2001

## The Room

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### Recommended Citation

Wright, Carolyne (2001) "The Room," *Westview*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol21/iss1/13>

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# The Room

by Carolyn Wright

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.*

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from *The Iowa Review* (Vol. 28, No. 2)

