

RISHMA DUNLOP

Slow Burn

1

One of my students brings her infant son to class.
As I hold him I am reminded how sweet it feels to
carry a child who still hasn't lost the smell of the newly born.

How the body longs to decay.
Springtime seeps out of me, relentless
terminal pull. My life, this garment
which is on fire.

* * *

The song keeps turning over and over again,
lullaby and fugue
Nothing changes through the decades.
Each time, we adjust our hearts.

Prosodies come and go
move in and out of fashion.
And every spring is a scorched season
of slow fire,
new buds stung by rain
Droplets on the cowls of crocuses announce
reluctance.

How we harden and burn
as the sun rises and night shrugs.

* * *

You still move me
in this hard season.

I still find redemption in your mouth, in your hands.

* * *

Word-drunk. *Memento scrivi.*

There is no secret contingency. We rearrange, describe anew the
small, mortal things.

This single body making a tiny garment, my flesh-dress
gathering the past against itself.

Making an otherwise.

We are our final vocabulary
and how we use it.

What we have learned in the dark: lovemaking that is a form of prayer.
The simple truth of it. The sounds in our throats when we are most alive.

* * *

In the end the world is a language we never quite understand.
Poets jot down the alphabets of everyday.
All speech pulls us toward the infinite.
History threatens to swallow us
year after year.

* * *

2

Springtime along the wetlands of Iraq, on the banks of the Tigris and
Euphrates rivers.
Thousands of white storks migrate in the path of F15 bombers,
their nesting grounds blasted apart.

By the roadside, a five-year-old girl in her gold and orange dress.
Her dead body beside the bridge.
A young American soldier holds her in his arms,
tries to bury her in the shallow grave of Iraqi dirt.

Leave her he is told by his superior *There is no time for this.*

And so she is left there, the earth beginning to ripen into the meaning of
murder
sweet girl in her perfect dress.

On these days when something monstrous flashes across the eyes—
newspaper headline, snapshot, nightmare of a child dying

Listen to your own deepest breath. Go down on your knees. Taste everything.

Give us this day the slant of sunlight. Hold the rain in your hands.

Hold still hold still.

* * *

3

Take off your traveling clothes.

Set down your bags.

Lay your head upon me. You are home.

My robe is lined with crimson silk for you. Love will kill us. Love will save us.

Love and the words from beneath the earth

When we are kneed to the ground

tempted to stop-out

Remember battle of the red cells shattered fragments of hell

prayer smoke wreckage starred flesh

Whir of monarch butterflies, orange-gold dust of thousands of wings.

Listen to the earth's prayer which has the perfume of newborns.

The right word can send you breathless.

Everything is speaking and singing. We are here.

This life. Long, slow burn of a struck match.