

MICHAEL HELM

## On Rishma Dunlop's Poetry

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Rishma's life and intellectual scope were felt presences inside her poetry and gave dimension to her considerable expressive talent. In *Metropolis* and *The Body of My Garden* the lines ply back and forth between the personal and the social. In each book, the most common speaking voice, and the most intimate, builds poem to poem into a character whose past and present we know almost novelistically. The character is drawn sharply —and Rishma was especially good at this — from both actuality and dream. Rishma finds unbroken territories even in the well-trod landscapes of cities and love. The work feels new, brought up from great depths and surfacing with brightly original intelligence. Among the thirteen sections of "Inauguratio," (alluding to Wallace Stevens, we assume), we read that "The blackbird is what we know./Brains in wings and hands./Lessons of scriptures and physics./Lucid, inescapable. The mind is an/Old crow seeking universal laws/Wheeling and swarming at/The edge of the world." Rishma's writing knows to do this, to travel upon knowing to the edge of the world and, once there, extend it.

In her work we sense a great intuition for balancing ground and abstraction so as to get the most of each. At the end of "Gardens of Paradise," dream, loss, and desire are particularized with great power: "harem mothers dream of sons/hearts steeled against/the tiny fists/hammering in their brains." This poem sequence is inflected beautifully with what we know of the book's main speaker, the locus of experience and thought who registers, so often at the same time, both the long inheritances of history and the new findings of a desiring, venturing mind.

Rishma was comfortable working in different creative genres and both within and against traditions. These traditions are literary and historical. *White Album* animates personal and cultural pasts, not only political and religious

cultures, but popular ones. The writings remind us, in the best sense, that the contradictions, frictions, and strangenesses caused by global migrations are old; and they played out even more acutely in past decades, when North American commercial culture largely succeeded in creating a kind of shared, single consciousness, and when difference or perceived difference was not so easily accommodated. In this way, thematically, Rishma's work is both resonant with the past and very much of the moment.

None of this would matter, of course, if the writing weren't so sharp. Again, Rishma's work stands out word to word, line to line, sentence to sentence. From "Driving Home With Chet" we find the jazz musician's "eighth notes slurring past slate roofs" and, later, we're fixed about five different ways when "someone hisses a white rage for the song gone out of their bones." Such imagery, such language, is partly what makes Rishma's work stand above that of many other writers who write from the position of the insider perceived as outsider. She never leans too easily upon worn dualities or makes too-familiar gestures. The poems bring all of us her world and our own into the same wholeness, as if to say they are of the same substance.