

# Slow Burn

Rishma Dunlop

## 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.

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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.

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You still move me  
                            in this hard season.

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

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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.

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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    starved 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.

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