

# Elemental

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## Flames in the Highway

It is true that the Red Dust has its joys, but they are evanescent and illusory.

—Cao Xueqin, *Dream of the Red Chamber*

i.

A break of color signals  
for the years of waiting  
to march on inexorably,  
a crowd of crimson banners.

ii.

The shrub of a late summer  
bloom is a blinding fire,  
the twilight flowers drop  
a vision on bobbing heads:  
Petals in a downstream pilgrimage  
get home sooner.

iii.

Under breath, words of passion  
folded like kisses to keep prying  
eyes sober, distracted from the  
friction of two bodies using up  
all the kindling possible.

iv.

Headlights can seem like sirens  
in the yawn of this grey desert.  
We know what they are wailing for  
as they fall into a familiar pattern;  
red lanterns stranded, from a storm  
roaring uninvited at this festival.

v.

Like a naked grain of wheat, each  
layer stripped from me as raw meat  
blinking untouched in the gashing  
whiteness of a stinking sanitation.

vi.

Sea of flame, sea of wine  
ballads to the color ought to be  
remembered. Lest you forget,  
think of the blood of life.

## Suspension

Take the memory as a fin would  
brace the salt  
when the dawn begins to hurry.

I commit it to  
the ocean in my mind  
swelling as large as  
the milky rib of a whale  
protruding, the muted bay  
we test gently with our feet.

A home cannot be built  
on sand. It is a teaching  
older than the birth of this beach,  
when what was washed  
on shore hewed the remains  
of understanding, mollusc shells,

the knowledge of things that  
end.

An image hails the monotony  
of ripples, frees the final  
form lingering—  
a palm letting go  
of a breath of dark sand,  
the promise is  
swaying, limp in the  
stale water.

## Spirit of the Season

I pray that these hollow caverns  
would keep the quiet absent from  
steady echoes of voices and faces,  
  
buried in a boneyard of decades  
that have flown around  
like geese migrating or escaping the  
turning of the harshest season—  
  
a coat of second skin from the humidity,  
lightning splits the sky into three,  
the taste of a swarm of bees,  
  
all slivers past the threshold  
presenting selves  
as a suggestion into this  
room yet to be filled.

How a disappearance must  
fall flat before a  
dousing sound.

A drop of rain splatters  
across a car window and  
calls me to the breaking  
of small things—

anger,  
a word said or otherwise,  
the worry of the past or future,  
me.

How severely  
does the body lie floating.

## Gardening Alone

We were born as thorns when we lived  
together in marshes concealed in  
darkened bark where  
you left a seed in a plot of clay,  
shallow as the bed you dug.

I lay my roots down in loam  
you've long sifted through  
with the edge of your spade.

I hear the crunch beneath your boots,  
of stones we arranged,  
slipping by each water's reach,  
slipping like the rosary beads  
you held up uttering all my first names  
in novena.

When space encroached on our landfills,  
I thought you would lift the latch on the gate  
but I watched the evening clouds  
take the tails of your shirt;  
you had drowned in that chalice-colored sea  
as you wanted.

Look for me sometimes, no plant of guilt  
has ever dared sprout in your place.  
After all,  
the pages lining the book you read every night  
are children of the home  
you surrendered the keys to me.

## Petrichor

Your hand curls around what isn't there—  
perhaps it is the air you've been saving to exhale  
on a day you wanted to close your eyes to,  
or was it the space that carved its way  
inside your belly,  
the salt-and-rice that could not sate the hunger  
you did not know you had—  
a taste for the pictures  
beyond your worn out school book  
or a visceral itch  
that could only be scratched with the promise  
that your children (merely seeds in your mind)  
would not know your pangs;  
but your thirst was not ignored  
and your open but unspeaking mouth  
was a cup for the rainwater  
that had not spared even an inch of your untouched skin,  
brown as the dirt you used to till with your father.

You will sleep now  
and your dreams will leave the weight of your body,  
carried by the sighing wind,  
with the petrichor from the ruptured veins of your land.

The mud baptizes you in its own Name,  
and if long ago you burst from the soil  
crying your first tears,  
then tonight the tears have been shed for you  
so you can recline  
to coalesce into the puddles  
shattering the flatness of the earth.