

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.