Lover Through Departure: New and Selected Poems
by Rishma Dunlop

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

I’ve often wondered about the wisdom of issuing a ‘new and selected’ volume of poetry. Doesn’t the concept defy marketing logic? After all, you are limiting future sales by issuing in one volume what could be issued in two. But then again, the actual publishing of poetry itself defies marketing logic since what is the point of producing something which, sadly, you know from the outset isn’t going to sell.

That ‘sadly’ is particularly poignant in Rishma Dunlop’s case, as she deserves to have her poetry disseminated. Her previous four volumes of poetry are White Album (Inanna, 2008), Metropolis (Mansfield Press, 2005), Reading like a Girl (Black Moss Press, 2004), and The Body of My Garden (Mansfield Press, 2002). Her poetry covers extensive ground, ranging from postcolonialism to ecopoetry. In addition to being a poet, she is a playwright, essayist, and translator and teaches creative writing, English, and education at York University. In 2009–10, she was awarded the Canada–U.S. Fulbright Research Chair in Creative Writing at Arizona State University. Not bad for a second-generation Canadian.

Early on, the reader encounters the title poem, “Lover Through Departure.” Ms Dunlop has a penchant for writing multi-part poems, of which this is one. Part 4 consists of three couplets:

It’s been a long time since I slept
in the tenderness of someone’s breath.

If I touch you now, you’ll wake to
a storybook moon over Superstition Freeway

and you’ll rise naked over palms and cacti
along the road, above the rooftops like thunder. (15)

Playing upon the trope of sex as a miniature death, she is transported by the other’s breath into mythology.

Our next sojourn will take place in the book whose title was inspired by the album The White Album. This choice is appropriate, given the Beatles’ George Harrison’s experiments with the sitar. Here was a Caucasian crossing over into the land of India while Ms Dunlop’s family history was the reverse. But not only that, as she expresses in “August Wedding: Anand Karaj,” where she first sets out her side’s wedding event:

I am led by men in rings
around the book of scriptures,
the Guru Granth Sahib. Four times
around in the Char Lavran, ragas
sung with tabla and harmonium,
hymns and prayers in a mother tongue
foreign to me. (67)

Born and raised in Canada, Dunlop did not learn her family’s language or culture and was probably more familiar and comfortable with her second ceremony:

The relief on your Scottish
mother’s face at the second ceremony
when we are double-ringed English.
The minister’s voice let us pray in witness
and blessing and Holy Kiss and Amen. (67)

Bridging this cultural divide, both within the family and within society, was an ongoing battle for her, as she expresses in “First Lessons: Post-Colonial,” found in her second book, Reading like a Girl. Here, her teacher has pulled down a world map showing the class the Himalayas while, for her:

Under my fingernails, the scents of spices
and teas, the silk phrasings of my mother’s
saris, the stench of imperial legacy, blood
spilled from swords on proper khaki uniforms
lanced through the bodies of Sikh soldiers at
the front lines of her Majesty’s British Army.
But our teacher never said, Remember this. (122)

“The New Republic of Letter,” from Metropolis, has a Sharon Olds feel to it, particularly the fourth stanza:

Here, the poet is voice,
memory of the guillotine,
sounds of erasure and delight.
Kiss my throat until my
belly tightens. Give me a recitative,
vowels engraved upon my scars,
light written on the roof of my mouth.
Rub my feet with milk. (80)

This highly sensuous poem ends with the epitaph: “I will close your eyes as I promised./ Then I will eat your heart.” (81) This is about as erotic as a poem can get before verging into pornography.

I mentioned earlier Dunlop’s eco_poetry. A good example is found in her new poems, “Birth of a City.” The layout of the triplet reminds one of a pantoum, although what is presented is not the general subject matter of that form. But perhaps it can be read as a love poem for something lost – the original garden, as the biblical references reveal. An incredible list acts as a segue into Eden:

. . . Eardrums burst and deafness
numbs. Someone’s heart about to stop. Someone’s
about to break a leg. Someone’s about to be delivered.
Someone’s seeking redemption. Tiny skulls
recite, on sedimentary rock, psalms of gardens
and serpents and apple tragedies.

But such prayers exhaust, till I see the crow
weep for us, take the blame for us. He travels
upwards, black turning white, white turning yellow, (16)

When did the Western world lose the ability to be inspired by poetry? And why? I’ve had these
discussions often without resolve. Perhaps, if that world were to read Ms Dunlop’s poetry, it might find
it again. 

John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for The Malahat Review,
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