From End of Empire

By Marissa Davis

Lot’s Wife

It was a cold spring**,** like an epiphany  
bludgeoned.

Threadbare, a land without violet irises  
to suture the whine of dust.

O, this country, this nacred  
slaughterhouse—our fates

were a plowed migration route,  
a tangle of grapevine.

The seraphs’ catalyst: only my husband  
would give the newcomers

what was deserved: a cooked meal,  
a place to pose weary heads. The rest

would aim to own them,  
distilling each body

to a convenient use. Use, this country’s  
tungsten covenant,

what the generations, fungal, fruit,  
breaking flesh

down to blooded colony.  
We too were called strangers here,

had learned this.  
What is left to say, then,

when a distant maker rears  
to gash the fields with sulfur,

& the red sun rolls  
to close its wings,

& horizon mutates  
into a crust of flies, the sky

a woozy lantern,  
an inferno rain, a reckoning?—

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| Wait. Let me begin again. I turned—  I couldn’t stop me. One could say because  I had no other origin, my mother no other tongue.  Or I remembered how the river wrapped my thighs like fresh silk,  how my throat tensed to sob when owlsong  hauled dusk back to the woods’ black branches.  Or I thought of my children, of my childhood,  of how I had nowhere else to go on this whole heartbroken earth,  & perhaps that meant there was some hard stone sharding  in me too I was something other, closer,  than a brute beast’s whelp, I was an avatar  of my own enemy, its skin was mine, & I was  no python who could whip my shape to shed it. |

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| Let me begin again. I was made, here, an ancient woman:  a body without a country, a body without a body, the love in me  a charred dahlia, a salted field,  my name kept hidden from my face.  I turned— a peculiar  triumph—as ruin succumbed to the ruin  it birthed, & our twin threads whorled into one  fray set to snap. I was a rage, first,  then I was clean rapture, & the moon  was falling over Sodom like an ax. |

Broke-Down Litany for an Empire’s End

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| **THERE ARE MANY** small apocalypses, an emergent complexity like a neural network or a colony of fire ants |

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| disaster is always hypothetical until it comes cat-scratching, fevers; until it crosses the house’s threshold like a skeleton bride |

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| horizon shapeshifts in the days of western blaze; bent with apoxia, dawn forgets itself to sunset |

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| if a bee is dying in a yard in West Virginia, a bee is dying on a sidewalk in Beirut if a bee is dying in an Alsacienne creek, a bee is dying on the small quakes of the Mekong River |

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| one apocalypse is water, one is the warmth that swells it  one apocalypse is that the subway always floods first in the brownblack Bronx |

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| this much light unnerves me, marks a second coming like a signature forged in a smith’s flame |

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| how to account for the godweight of a hyphen, trickster king that links & snaps?  the souls of pride & shame have been bodyswitched  touch blade to the abscess leaking antithetical  birthrights: an absence or a surplus of heat |

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| who will answer for $140 a head in Adelanto |

one apocalypse was spit from the wooden wombs  
of ships docking in Liverpool, in Nantes

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| my home-ripped foremothers Black & Blackfeet have named this time a sweet-mouthed strawberry fracture. exactly what has been deserved. didn’t curse it so but laughed the wound open to pus, calling *let their bloodwalls crumble, barnyards wrath, cotton rot or rage the plains. they named us nothing.* |

i crawled into a septic rebeccan force,  
gummed its clothes to my skin  
like so many wood ticks.

told to leap—to fragment  
like a vase against the terrace stones—  
i almost did it.

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| if one apocalypse is islands’ interment, another is continents’ nonchalance |

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| if a bee is dying in the wire shadow of a burnt-bare redwood, a bee is dying in a schoolyard in Addis Ababa  by a child’s skinned knee. a mingling of bloods. |

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| today, Kabul falls like a Kabul that is falling. there are no similes for the swallowing of homes. |

I call to you, Wounded Knee.  
I call to you, Tulsa & Nogeun-ri.  
I call to you, Palestine.  
I call to you, Vietnam, Iraq.  
I call to you, my family  
in the time-deep fields  
of Carolina, stolen to toil  
on a stolen earth, to nourish,  
for centuries, someone else’s spectral  
abundance, & with it, their acrobatic  
ability to steal.

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| cousins, we have wounds gagged quiet. the cloth, like the wound, is someone’s precise, purposeful labor |

one apocalypse tunnels down a birth canal  
shaped like a drone’s steel guts

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| one problem being that *land,* in a devil’s tongue, translates so easily to *mammon.* a curse of assonance. |

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| & no one will be free until the land is free |

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| o language, i’ve nearly caught you. i see you close enough to spin a web. |

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| the hyphen’s latter linkage is its own chopped syntax frankensteined to serve a border’s grammar |

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| (which, in this context, means an utterance taking three dimensions, becoming porous  in one direction—like a sphincter or the mouth of a sphinx, & thus, historically, a strangulation;  a frontier or a furnace depending on where one’s feet touch ground,  where, on the paper edge of a rock’s boiling core, one’s mother yelled & broke into water) |

i didn’t send the missile, but  
my gas sure was cheap.

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| a bee dying in the track where a river once ran in Arizona a bee dying in a grave of sticks, once a Moroccan orchard a bee dying among the should-be apples a bee dying among the should-be oranges,            hard little sunsets that would have tasted like a bee dying among the whimpering basil buds, among the quaking clockface heads of passionflower, counting down to |

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| the test results say oil is the father of at least 8.5 apocalypses |

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| who will answer for the children of Fort Bliss who will answer for the lost women of Juárez  who will answer for the breath of George & the breath of Philando who will answer for the ears of Gianna, for the eyes of Dae’Anna, for the rips in their hand-size hearts |

does this verse risk becoming dated?  
asks the poet surviving the first  
of a latent legion of plagues

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| honorable senator, what a timely investment in body bags |

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| *empire* from proto-indo-european *pere:* to procure. or it could have been *pere:* to produce. or play around & drop the bogus binary: we could speak  of what is procured for production. the means to the ends, guaranteed to be justified. the end, deemed justified, rouges its damage *collateral,* dabs the wet lip & makes a pretty face.  American sonata: leave the past to the past. |

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| if a bee is dying, it is dying in the soundless, monumental way of certain saints  who will answer for it |

when a headline blares: *Is this the fall of America?*  
it can only be understood one way or the other.  
if the first: daybreak is a program  
scripted to malfunction. ready a dance  
for the waiting graves of bullets  
once betrothed to you,  
condemned to die virginal—

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| flavor profile of an apocalypse, for once, well earned: sweetburn of a hacked-open beehive; scar tissue thickening a rose’s red; coyotes’ water hymns, a blue balm on the bloody valley; dusk leaking down the left wing of a swallowtail |

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| & so undoing becomes its own augury |

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| our Manderley,  asphyxiating, our god- damned house of damnation:  in a springless world, this little kingdom is deciduous.  rejoice. it’s a kind of justice. an oblivion season burrows right through our names. |

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| call synonym the asymptote, plot             luxe & decay—difference             tapering like daylight |

—if the second: o enemy,  
was there another choice? look  
at this ruin, barbing backward & backward;  
how each root bleaches the soil it grips.  
this coffin was built when the cradle was,  
& from that cradle’s poison oak