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 becauseI had no other origin,my mother no other tongue.Or I remembered how the river wrappedmy thighs like fresh silk,how my throat tensed to sobwhen owlsonghauled dusk backto the woods’ black branches.Or I thought of my children,of my childhood,of how I had nowhere else to goon this whole heartbroken earth,& perhaps that meantthere was some hard stone shardingin me too I was somethingother, closer,than a brute beast’s whelp,I was an avatarof my own enemy, its skinwas mine, & I wasno python who could whipmy 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 mea charred dahlia,a salted field,my name kept hiddenfrom my face.I turned—a peculiartriumph—as ruinsuccumbed to the ruinit birthed, & our twin threadswhorled into onefray set to snap.I was a rage, first,then I was cleanrapture, & the moonwas falling over Sodomlike an ax. |

Broke-Down Litany for an Empire’s End

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| **THERE ARE MANY** small apocalypses,an emergent complexitylike a neural networkor a colony of fire ants |

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| disaster is always hypotheticaluntil it comes cat-scratching, fevers;until it crosses the house’s thresholdlike 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 Beirutif 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 itone apocalypse is that the subway alwaysfloods first in the brownblack Bronx |

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| this much light unnerves me,marks a second cominglike a signature forgedin 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 & shamehave been bodyswitchedtouch blade to the abscessleaking antitheticalbirthrights: an absenceor 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 & Blackfeethave named this time a sweet-mouthedstrawberry fracture. exactlywhat has been deserved. didn’t curse it sobut 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 Abababy a child’s skinned knee.a mingling of bloods. |

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| today, Kabul fallslike a Kabul that is falling.there are no similesfor the swallowingof 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 syntaxfrankensteined to serve a border’s grammar |

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| (which, in this context, means an utterancetaking three dimensions, becoming porousin one direction—like a sphincter or the mouthof a sphinx, & thus, historically, a strangulation;a frontier or a furnace dependingon 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 Arizonaa bee dying in a grave of sticks, once a Moroccan orcharda bee dying among the should-be applesa bee dying among the should-be oranges,           hard little sunsets that would have tasted likea 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 oilis the father of at least 8.5apocalypses |

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| who will answer for the children of Fort Blisswho will answer for the lost women of Juárezwho will answer for the breath of George & the breath of Philandowho 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 & dropthe bogus binary: we could speakof what is procured for production.the means to the ends, guaranteedto 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 dyingin the soundless, monumental way of certain saintswho 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: sweetburnof a hacked-open beehive; scar tissuethickening a rose’s red; coyotes’water hymns, a blue balmon the bloody valley; duskleaking down the left wingof 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 kingdomis deciduous.rejoice. it’s a kindof justice. an oblivionseason burrows rightthrough 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