

Rishma Dunlop

Catherine

for Catherine Jane Troy Dunlop (1926-1997)

The Ship's Company of the "Aquitania" send you best wishes
for your happiness and good fortune in your new life in the
great Dominion, the country of your adoption.

March 1946

Widow's skin parched
spilling memory in waves
bloodremembering
across cool, hospital sheets.

Dreams of dancing
her gnarled joints unknotted,
flesh supple,
spinning to Tommy Dorsey's big band music
cheek held against his khaki uniform
his wide smile spanning
the smoke-filled canteen.

She remembers scents,
liquid memories, exotic promise
in the drabness of war
Crepe de Chine, Shalimar
In London at the chemist's shop
her soldier buys her Chanel No.5.

The chemist has a nose for perfume
*The top note, he tells them, the one you smell first,
is the man-made synthetic aldehyde*

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then the middle notes, jasmine, lily of the valley, orris-root and ylang-ylang.

Finally, the base notes that make the perfume linger:

vetiver, sandalwood, cedar, vanilla, amber, civet and musk.

*Base notes are of animal origin, ancient memories of smell beginning
in vast plains and forests.*

It is scent that disturbs her drift of sleep
perfumare, through smoke.

She remembers ships of war brides
with their infants cradled
in the scent of salt air,
sailing into the arms
of Halifax harbour.

She becomes his geography
inhabited by mists,
Atlantic foam at her feet,
her body embedded
in fields of violets and wild berries,
endless harvests,
her blood flowing
in the veins
of new country.

Now, she resists the pull
of winter,
the deep white territory
of skin and ghosts

she insists upon another day
does not want the slow descent
into ice.

I reach for her to stop time
with my heat
breathing fire into
the clasp
of paper dry hands.