

**Poems by Rishma Dunlop
Paintings by Gailene Powell**

Songs Before the Dawn

*I've stitched my dress with continents,
bound to the equator round my waist.
I waltz to a steady rhythm, bending slightly.*
—Nina Cassian, "Knowledge"

*The inner – what is it?
If not intensified sky,
hurled through with birds and deep
with the winds of homecoming.*
—Rainier Maria Rilke

A Chorus of Wings

The heart is a feathered thing,
a kingfisher's wing,
a dove with a flickering tongue,
releasing itself,
in the hollow rumble of

Rishma Dunlop and Gailene Powell

ink-tipped wings,
plumage brilliant
in nocturnal flights.
In this music,
the valves of the heart
open and close.

The beating of wings is a primal music, filling the earth with the music of heartbeats, deeply connected to birthings, to the double heartbeats of mother and infant in the womb, to the human pulse. Birds are messengers, the holders of our prayers, their songs rising before the dawn in invocations and closing our days in benedictions. Their wings throb with the joys and mournings of the earth, beating a steady rhythm that can be heard across continents. Birds are hope and faith, and homecoming, everpresent and steadfast, their wings hurled through a violent world.



Gailene Powell, "Stillness," 12" x 12", oil on canvas.

Terra Promessa: Elegy for Sarajevo

Your land
dismembers itself,
limb by limb,
crying for life,
rough-tongued
in scarlet
mouth.

On the other side of the world,
images of your children haunt me.
May you taste
the bitter stain

of the place that cradled you.
May you feel the blood-spill
of your people
salted by my tears.

May you hear
the songbirds
that gather
may their songs drown
the screams of vultures,
beating wings against
your red sky.

May these days of carnage
be softened into dust,
cleanse the skin
of your earth.

May your breath
be resurrected
by the human cantos
of mercy.

Phoenix

Hope is the thing with feathers.

—Emily Dickinson

In my garden,
the poppies have bloomed
their scarlet tissue paper petals
falling brilliant to the ground.
I gather the light of these flowers,
watch my daughters walk to the beach
their long limbs flying down the road
to the sea's embrace.

In my garden,
I read the newspaper headlines
Scent of poppies, stench of death.
Outside Kosovo's capital Pristina
along the Road to Leskovac
Makovac, Yugoslavia
Look closer
call it the highway to hell.

As ethnic Albanians
return home
this country road
reeks with the stench
of death
from houses
from mass graves
in fallow fields
overgrown
with multitudes
of flowers.

Here is a living room,
inside, a shroud of ashes
still shaped like the body of a man
who was rolled in blankets
and burned alive.

Here, the wind blows music
through walls punctured with bullet holes,
where Serbian police executed men
while they kneeled,
their words of prayer caught
in the stopped pulse
of the world.

Here is the house
used as a chamber of rape
refugees who returned home
found dozens of buttons
ripped from clothes
alongside bloody blankets
and women's underwear.

Here are the cows,
slaughtered by machine-guns,
by deliberate hands,
pistol chambers triggering
bullets through their heads.
Their carcasses lie
among fields of flowers,
the brilliant wounds of poppies
and the scent of rotting flesh
mingling with the perfume
of crushed lavender.

Here, is a black quartz watch
still ticking
next to a sleeve
in a mass grave.
Witnesses say the watch
was once on a hand
now eaten away
by animals

and everywhere
in the villages
under skies full of pitch and smoke,
women bury their men,
fathers, husbands, lovers, sons

women's labour rinsing away
the fetid stench,
scrubbing, scrubbing

In my garden
I wonder
what good are my words
all the charred utterings of poets
bearing witness
in the face of fresh horrors
how do I speak to my children
and to my students
of holocausts and human devastations
how to speak of the clawmarks of swastikas,
of the dark hearts we must claim as history

what will endure of these fragments of verse
what will reach the heart

all I can do is record and speak
and hope that silences will be broken
that comfort will be sung
through the obscenities of civilization.

In my garden
the sun blazes gold
and in its fire
a phoenix rises
as it will rise over
the burnt ashes of those fields
of wildflowers
and in the beat of bird wings
hearts will pulse again.

Grace: The Garden of My Familiar

We exist, given the presence of our familiars.

—Louise Bogan

The day opens
waking us to songs
multitudes of red-throated birds
sunlight streams through
shuttered windows

In the garden
the terrace spills
blooms lush against
driftwood
salvage from the beach
bursts of pinks and corals
purple embrace of clematis
and wild plum trees

a hummingbird drinks nectar
from the belled tongues
of fuschia

a scarlet bird hovers
jewel-like
in amber air

I hear the beat of your heart
in the thrumming
of its wings

my daughter Rachel
presses wildflowers
on a page of poems
gifts she writes for me

as day slips into indigo
the garden holds us
in the bowl of her hands
flesh warm and tender
rooting us
in a blue-heron sky.



Gailene Powell, "Prayer," 24" x 31", oil on canvas.

Prayer

Let the politician return home to his wife and infant daughter.
Let him lay his head down upon his wife's silk lap and let him dream.
Let him dream in blue, the color of his newborn's eyes, *tabula rasa*.

Let us hear the cries of the men and women who ache with loneliness.
Let their mouths be filled with tears and with music.
Let their solitude be the garments of angels.

Let the fearful child find an apricot, a starfish, a fistful of rubies.

Let the mothers and fathers whose children have been murdered
find boxes of moonlight.

Let the murderers lay down their weapons.
Let the taste of blood-oranges flower on their tongues.

Let the starving have their bellies filled.

Let them have the sweetness of plums.

Let the bodies of lovers who have become strangers, touch each other
again.

Let them have the thrust of love.

Let it be like the first time, when skin on skin made them transparent,
coming and melting in the heat of summer.

Let us have the imperfections of moon and wind and love.

Let us hear the song
of the white dove rising
before the dawn.

Let the poet have her red shoes.

Let her have her wet vowels, her breathing consonants, her liturgy of
syllables.

Let the poet be the throat of these hours.



Gailene Powell, "Night Flight," 24" x 18", oil on canvas.

Night Flight: Winter Solstice

On the eve of a performance of the Yarker Chamber Music Society
The Old Schoolhouse, Yarker, Ontario, Dec. 16, 2000

On this night
the sun melts a scarlet fire
into the violet and indigo
of the night sky.
On this night they say
the sun will return at midnight
and the dark hours will lift
across the trees.

At the Old Schoolhouse
the Chamber musicians prepare for performances,
their open tunings, the discordant keenings
of instruments.

The words “chamber music” echo hollow
through my discarded memories,
an abacus spills through my hair
burnt cinders fly from my mouth.

I drift along the edges of time
and I am a small girl in Montréal,
my velvet jumper,
my long black braids tied with ribbons,
my patent leather shoes,
in the church hall
the music solemn, mournful,
the notes held
in my mother’s rigid backbone,
her stern spine pinning me into proper place.

But tonight the moon unwinds her blue
blesses the babies and friends who gather,
gary and Rena
little Hayden in his red flannel shirt
newborn Zinta, her angel breath.

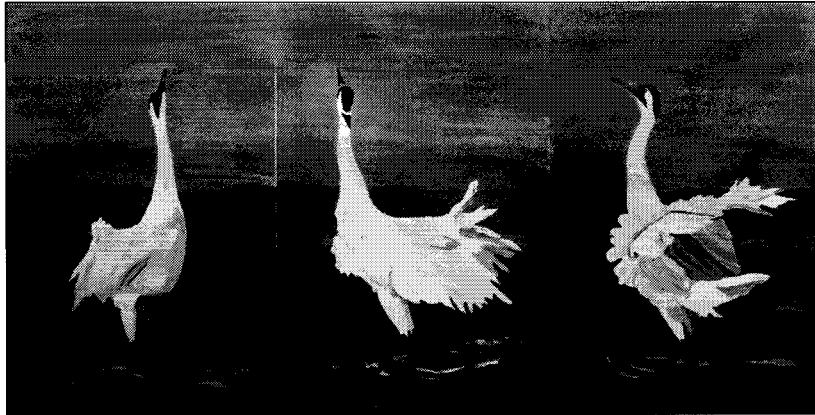
And the concert begins,
Rena’s hands flying over the piano,
James on the flute.
The air weeps.

Tonight my long black hair
is unbound.
Dressed in my velvet
I think of you
my heart loosened in a *Pavane*,
cradled by a Fauré *Berceuse*.

Outside, the birds
begin their nocturnal flights
and tonight
in this roomful of people
I know we are all helpless

in the face of love
fragile as the inner flesh of
a bare wrist.

In this night music,
in the symphony of wingbeats,
the heart lightens and rises.



Gailene Powell, "Dancing Cranes," 36" x 72", oil on canvas.

The Lost Language of Cranes

I

*For if Hiroshima in the morning, after the bomb has fallen,
Is like a dream, one must ask whose dream it is.*

—Peter Schwenger, *Letter Bomb: Nuclear
Holocaust and the Exploding Word*

Reading with my daughter
the story of *Sadako and the Thousand Cranes*
Rachel loves to tell the story
of the little Japanese girl
who is almost two
when the bomb explodes
a mile from her home
in Hiroshima.
Her family is grateful
for survival
spared the grotesque deaths
of others
they run
fleeing to the banks
of the River Ota

drenched by the black rain
falling, falling
When she is twelve years old,
Sadako runs like the wind
in school relay races
the best runner in the sixth grade
until she falters
weakened

doctors discover
Sadako has *Atomic Bomb Disease*

leukemia gnaws at her body

In the hospital, Sadako's closest friend
reminds her of the *Tsuru*, the crane
Japanese symbol of long life
of hope

*If you fold a thousand cranes
they will protect you from illness
grant you a wish*

Sadako tells the cranes
*I will write peace on your wings
and you will fly all over the world*

Sadako, determined
begins folding
folding fragments of newspapers
discarded wrappers from her medicines
making tiny paper cranes
her gifts to the world,
folding, folding against time
and memory

Sadako's mother writes:
*If she has to suffer like this,
she should have died that morning
on August 6th.*

Her mother watches Sadako,

painstaking folding,
her mother's hands
helpless to heal
wants something beautiful
in the face of death
she buys silk fabric
printed with cherry blossoms
makes a kimono
to enfold her daughter

Her small fingers
folding, folding
day after day
Sadako makes 644 cranes
before she dies

her classmates complete
her thousand cranes
place them in her coffin
as if her heart would continue
to beat in the paper wings

her mother wraps her daughter
in the softness of silk
in her cherry blossom kimono
lays flowers with the birds
so that her child could bring them
with her to the next world.

Sadako's mother asks the birds:
Why didn't you sing? Why didn't you fly?

II

A cemetery seen from the air is a child's city.

—Carolyn Forché, "The Garden Shukkei-en"

I watch my daughter and her friends
folding tiny origami cranes
for their class project,
these winged symbols of peace

spread rainbow-hued across
the kitchen table.
The paper birds criss-cross
the earth in correspondences
for peace projects
their hopeful wings trying
to tell the horrors of war
the cheery optimism of classroom curriculum.

The children will send
the paper cranes
in garlands with 100 birds each
to the mayor of Hiroshima
to be placed
with millions of paper cranes
at the foot of the Children's Monument
where the stone figure of Sadako
holds a large golden crane
above her head
arms outstretched
to the sky

I watch my children play
wonder if the power of birds
will stand strong against
exploding words and mushroom clouds
against the screams that reverberate
amidst the silence of Hiroshima's Peace Park.

III

*After I noticed the flash, white clouds spread over the blue sky.
It was as if blue morning glories had suddenly bloomed...*

—Testimony of Isao Kita

By the banks of the river Ota
where Sadako used to play
in the Garden Shukkei-en,

stands a stone angel holding
an origami crane.

Hibakusha, survivors
who are still alive
wander the garden,
across the pond
on the Kokoukyo Bridge,
through tea ceremonies
and the blossomings
of plums and cherries and irises

In the garden
the silence
the insistence of memory
the flash of light,
the burning heat
the shattering of glass
everywhere the cries of children
calling for their mothers

bodies stripped naked
by the blast
skin peeling
hanging from fingertips
like cloth,
mothers holding
dying children
in their arms
trying in vain
to pluck away
the swarming maggots

bones in rice bowls,
babies crawling
over dead mothers
rooting for nipples
seeking milk
their reflections shimmering
like ghosts

against a clear blue sky,
flames of fire

and then
black
sticky rain
falling, falling

on trees
on flowers
on rooftops
on people
the world
turning black

it could not be washed off

IV

*...Somewhere slow
poetry is being tender with its alphabet.*
—Don MacKay, “A Morning Song”

Outside my house
the morning sun spills
gilded ripples across the bay.
The cranes stilt across the mudflats.

I wonder what they know,
what we have lost,
these birds that mate for life.
Sometimes in the shallow waters
of these wetlands
the cranes dance, sending waves
flying, a language of ancient memories
a language that teaches us that after grief
it is possible to love again,
a music we have forgotten,
such sheer joy.

When the cranes lift in ascent,

Rishma Dunlop and Gailene Powell

cathedrals of wind
rise in their wingbones,
estuaries of morning light
lifting across continents,
a white front of radiance, their cries
like clouds of desire.

After, in the presence of still waters,
you can rest in the white light
in the grace of wings.



Gailene Powell, "Concordance," 24" x 40", oil on canvas.

Concordance

The air is a knife
The sharp intake of winter
Frost over Ladner farms
A Diebenkorn landscape
And the sky full of thunder
The beat of wings
hawks, kestrels, geese, starlings
thousands of birds
on the Pacific Flyway.

The continent is heaving
With the drumming of flight
to Asia and Africa
and South America

my heart skips a beat, shifts

a lone crane spreads its wings
hesitates
and decides to stay.

Notes

“Phoenix”

The line “Scent of poppies, stench of death” is from the title of an article by Valerie Reitman in the Vancouver Sun, Tuesday, July 6, 1999.

“Night Flight: Winter Solstice”

This poem is for Gary Raspberry, Rena Uptis, Zinta, Hayden, and members of the Yarker Chamber Music Society.

“The Lost Language of Cranes”

Segments of this poem were informed and inspired by Carolyn Forché’s poems, “The Garden Shukkei-en,” and “Testimony of Light” in her collection *The Angel of History*.

Hibakusha: The first atomic bomb used in wartime was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6th, 1945, killing between 130,000 and 150,000 people by the end of that year. The term *hibakusha* refers to survivors of the Atomic Bomb. Those who survived the bombing are rapidly aging now after struggling for many years. Segments of this poem are informed by the testimonies collected and videotaped by the Hiroshima Peace and Culture Foundation to commemorate the International Year of Peace in 1986.

Excerpts referring to Sadako Sasaki’s mother, Fujiko Sasaki, are based on a letter titled “Come Back to Me Sadako,” from *Record of Atomic Bombs in Japan* by Seishi Toyota, Nihon Tosho center, 1991.

When Sadako died on Oct.25, 1955, her classmates folded the missing paper cranes to make a thousand and placed them in the coffin with Sadako’s body. Since then the paper crane has become an international symbol of nuclear disarmament.

Sadako’s friends and classmates collected Sadako’s letters and writings and published them under the title *Kokeshi*, after the name of a doll they had given Sadako in the hospital. Inspired by this collection and the remarkable effect Sadako’s story had on others, Eleanor Coerr wrote the powerful book, *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*, G.P. Putnam, 1993. A video by the same title is narrated by Liv Ullman, produced by the American Library Association.

Sadako’s classmates also began a national campaign to build a monument in her memory. It was built to honor all children who suffered from the devastating consequences and effects of the nuclear bomb. The Statue of Sadako is also known as The Children’s Monument. Built in 1958 with donations from school children, the monument stands in the center of Hiroshima’s Peace Park

surrounded by millions of paper cranes sent from people around the world. At its base is a plaque with the following inscription:

This is our cry
This is our prayer
Peace in the world