

# Folio

**In Memoriam  
Rishma Dunlop, 1956-2016**



*Rishma Dunlop and Suzanne Northcott*

## Editor's Notes

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Rishma Dunlop, author of *Lover Through Departure: New and Selected Poems* (Mansfield Press, 2011), received many honours for her work, including the Canada-U.S. Fulbright Research Chair in Creative Writing and the Emily Dickinson Prize for Poetry. Born in India, Dunlop grew up in Beaconsfield, Quebec and was named a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 2011. Editor of the groundbreaking anthology, *White Ink: Poems on Mothers and Motherhood* (Demeter, 2007), Dunlop was a beloved professor of English and Creative Writing at York University, Toronto. A prolific talent whose work spanned multiple genres, Dunlop's poems, essays and translations appeared in numerous national and international anthologies and journals. Her books of poetry include *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 radio play, *The Raj Kumari's Lullaby*, was commissioned by CBC Radio in 2005.

Dunlop's strong literary commitment and humanitarian vision shaped the anthologies she edited, among them, *An Eco-poetics Reader: Art, Literature and Place* (*Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 2008) and the critically acclaimed *Red Silk: An Anthology of South Asian Canadian Women Poets* (Mansfield Press, 2004). From 2004 to 2009, Dunlop was literary editor of the *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering (JARM)*, introducing its readership to some of the most distinguished voices in contemporary poetry. Dunlop died after a long battle with cancer in April 2016. She will be remembered as a bright star in the literary firmament; her poetry was a force to be reckoned with. As Molly Peacock observed, her poetry possesses "crystalline power" and "fearlessly focuses on the contradictions of her time."

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Somewhere around 2006, a call for poems on mothers and mothering caught my eye. *White Ink*, the proposed anthology, would gather a chorus of voices to reflect the fullest range of maternal poetries and poetics. With Rishma Dunlop as editor, it would be, I guessed, singular and spectacular: ambitious, politically engaging, international in scope, and comprehensive in its vision. Several years before, on an early autumn evening at an Association for Research on Mothering Conference held at York University, I'd heard Rishma read; I was struck by the elegance of her lyrically rich and fiercely intelligent poems—poems that were deeply attuned to the challenges that contemporary women face as they balance the varying roles of their private lives as mothers, daughters, wives, lovers, and friends with the artistic ambition of committed professionals. Though I didn't know it at the time, the kind note I received, via email, in response to my submission, was not the last time we'd be in touch.

Published in 2007, *White Ink* collects an astonishing array of work by award-winning late-twentieth and early twenty-first century writers. As Rishma explained in her critical introduction, "Writing the Mother: Notes on White Writing," "the world's social and political changes, as well as the imaginative pulse of the past three decades, are uniquely reflected in poetry on motherhood." Acknowledging, too, that the "the mother is written again and again across cultures, ethnicities, languages, genders, across geographies, politics, and histories," Rishma's selections included "more international poets, more male voices"—voices left at (or outside) the margins of similar collections. In *White Ink*, poems by Gabeda Baderoon, Mimi Khalvati, Gwendolyn Brooks, Claudia Rankine, and Sylvia Plath find counterparts in work by Philip Levine, Samuel Menashe, and Mahmoud Darwish—a reflection of Rishma's own expansive thinking about the connections between motherhood and writing, theory and practice, as she put it,

a more expansive taking up of white ink, moving beyond  
*l'écriture féminine*, post-structural feminist theory, and a limited  
gendered literary lens, toward a more inclusive connection of  
all writers to the mother. (4)

*White Ink* was only one of countless editorial projects that reflected Rishma's genius for shaping conversations and bringing attention to the work of fellow writers; her observation that an anthology "is never a finite thing," but that its "collection of voices offers us points of departure for thinking, writing, reading" is also reflected in her own artistic practice. *Studio*, the on-line journal she founded in 2007, reflected a similarly capacious vision, publishing lyrically rich and globally engaged up-to-the minute creative writing along

with hybrid forms, translations, visual art, and reviews, as well as essays about arts education. The project is an outstanding example of Rishma's work as a deeply committed literary citizen and global ambassador for the arts.

In 2009, Rishma stepped down from her role as literary editor at *JARM*, and I was honored to serve as her successor. For five years, as founding editor Andrea O'Reilly observed, Rishma had invited distinguished poets to "serve as each issue's resident poet and included a range of his/her poetry," a feature that became a "treasured gem" of the journal. At Andrea's request, Rishma collected a folio of poetry from her first four books, and passed these along to me—it was a welcome chance to pay tribute to her own compelling body of work. We'd talked by phone and via email a few times in the previous months over edits Rishma had offered on my then-forthcoming memoir, and I was delighted to be caught in the cinematic sweep of her work. Here's some of what I wrote about Rishma's poetry at the time:

A poet who writes "through the taste of fear/and rage and fury" with "milk and blood" and "ink fierce and iridescent," Dunlop possesses a memorist's eye for telling detail. And like the best memoirists, Dunlop ranges far beyond nostalgic recollection of the past and plunges headlong into the deepest ontological layers of human experience. Whether she is writing about first love, a father's death and a mother's grief, the passions of young motherhood, the interplay of *eros* and *caritas*, or the violence of city streets across the globe (the metropolis become necropolis), Dunlop's is a poetic that deftly connects the literal and autobiographical to the larger currents of history.... (*JARM* 11.1, 306)

Eventually, I'd meet Rishma in person, on her home ground in Toronto. I enjoyed a lively Q&A with her energetic and fiercely loyal students who offered high praise for the quirky writing prompts she gave, the strict word limit that seemed impossible, confining (imagine 99 words about shoes), but then always expanded their range; we sipped wine near the open window of her balcony loft, shared pots of tea, and wandered around a fashion exhibit at the Art Gallery downtown. She was full of laughter, witty asides, plans and projects—poetry, prose, and travel—connected to, but always traveling far beyond the local. That energy shines, too, in her later work—the poems that open *Lover Through Departure: New and Selected Poems* (2011) and two compelling prose projects, *Love and Cancer in the Candy Factory* (selections appeared in *The National Post*) and *Dangerous Words: The Poetry of Witness*, an investigation of poets whose work emerges in response to state-sponsored oppression and plays a role in the search for justice and reconciliation.

In the pages that follow, some of Rishma's closest familiars—friends, colleagues, fellow writers—pay tribute to her memory, literary legacy, the sense of inestimable loss felt by so many who admired the strength of her example in life and art. I'm grateful to Rishma's daughters, Cara and Rachel, for adding a special perspective on their mother's life and indelible influence. David Sobelman, Rishma's widowed husband and literary executor, has generously provided an afterword that includes the text of Rishma's final poem, "Rock Me."

The poetry collected in this Folio offers, of course, only a glimpse of Rishma's life's work. In the newer poems selected from *Lover Through Departure*, we encounter a poet of unflinching measures, one whose selection and arrangement of details reveal unsettling connections to social and political spheres, one who looks unsparingly at love, mortality, and all the decentering gifts of travel, paying witness to the beauty and violence of our contemporary moment. Her work insists on art's resistance to destructive forces, on elegy's power to humanize and foster healing. "I'm endlessly fascinated," I remember her once saying, "in the process of learning, how people learn"—and we readers are the beneficiaries.

At the time, we were sitting kitty-corner from a vintage Coke cooler in a boho diner somewhere in Queen Street neighborhood where she lived. As our salads and sandwiches arrived, Rishma was talking about the South African poets she was writing about and the dance classes she was taking—a happy alternative to going to the gym—and I remember how much I wished that she lived across the street, not over the border, that the distance between our lives was less. Her love of music equaled her love of poetry; she always found something to love in the quirky cds my husband and I sent through the mail. Over the years Rishma sent me reading recommendations, descriptions of her travels, and gorgeous snapshots taken on the day she married David. I remember how we walked along the street one Toronto spring afternoon: Rishma was picking up a bouquet of flowers before heading home; I was asking for directions back to my hotel. I can still hear her voice, resonant and generous amid the city traffic—an artist with an unerring compass.

—Jane Satterfield, August 2017