

In Remembrance: Rishma Dunlop

“Talk of death unhinges me,” Rishma writes in the opening line of her poem “*Lover Through Departure*.” Whom does it not unhinge? Sometimes I find it hard to remember her in the prime of her energies. When I arrived at York, where we taught together for several years, Rishma seemed the sure captain of the strange and unwieldy vessel of the university’s creative writing program. I constantly marveled at her competence regarding everything from the inner workings of the school and its staff, to our students with their talents and anxieties, to the best way to pilot a classroom so as to draw out those talents while quelling the anxieties. Even when navigating our byzantine bureaucracy, she remained artful and generous. Of course she was tough as nails when she needed to be. You didn’t want her occasional steely stare to be aimed at you. But she was at her most natural when exercising a poet’s alchemical intelligence, the ability to draw love and beauty out of the world’s given materials—which is how all her poetry tends.

Once she became sick, her circle of confidants began to shrink, and by the time she died, she was communicating only with her deepest intimates. But in the in-between time—the twilight in which the disease was formidable but not unbeatable, in which one might talk of living as if it were a processual struggle rather than a flat impossibility—Rishma and I had great conversations. She always chose to see me over lunch, and each time chose the venue with care. Our meals occurred at culinary islands of calm and propriety, from the hidden restaurant of a posh department store, to a stately museum café, to a minimalist temple of good taste and good French wine in the heart of Toronto’s most properly attired neighborhood. She curated the spaces in which she circulated to achieve maximum civility.

Our conversations during those languid meals often revolved around the mundane—her medical victories and setbacks, administrative problem-solving, teaching strategies for students we shared—and to my irritation I remember more of those exchanges than the ones about our emotional and literary lives. Usually I'm grateful my life isn't being recorded, and that my memory is far from photographic. But I wish I remembered the precise phrasing of those exchanges that turned to love and language. Every time Rishma's elegant hand lifted a glass of wine, I could see that her skin was turning blacker and more papery, as if she were turning into the paper that she inked with her words. But her spirits remained high. During our last lunch, she talked about when she would return to teaching, and about the memoir she was writing of her illness.

Rishma's poetry keeps returning, as all poetry does, to the subject of loss. On one point she is adamant: loss is not a terminal state. An early poem, "Montreal," observes, "The heart is buried at frequent intervals." The heart is buried—this is unavoidable. But it keeps on unearthing itself, starting up to beat again. In "Retablos," another early work, the speaker insists, "Nothing is lost unless we make it so." "Metropolis Redux" has the speaker pulling into Union Station, which is every Union Station, searching for the spot "where all things lost are recovered." And finally, in the late poem "August Wedding: Anand Karaj," a tenuous hope is transformed into simple certainty: "Nothing is really lost."

Rishma's early death was an impossible loss—there's no way around it. But her poetry knows and reminds us that "nothing is lost unless we make it so." Nothing is lost unless. Nothing is lost. No.