

UVic Diversity Writing Contest 2016, Second-Place Poetry Winner

By Kai Ivor Conradi

Sisters

For Brandi Bledsoe (1984-2016) and the countless others we have lost

Our sister,  
laid bare in the soft morning hours,  
feet and hands two bouquets of black hollyhock,  
stalks bound in plastic.  
A five-year-old boy finds her  
stretched out on the pavement like a cat in the sun  
only her chest is a void, and her eyes—  
were they open?

Body cut from the same velvet  
as shadows bundled tight in burlap bags,  
while the aspens shiver their beautiful sad limbs,  
and their pale skin runs like milk  
down the ridges of the night.

My sisters grew in this world  
like matches lit  
in the steaming breath of winter's street corner,  
burned holes in the dark bookends of fleeting days  
and pulled their fingers through the tangles in night's matted coat.  
In summer the fire was in throats and in limbs,  
knees buckled to the prayer of hot coals  
and knuckles scraped raw again dry riverbeds.

America, no home for our sisters  
who first tread this earth in bodies that deceived them.  
America, ashamed of its women,  
femininity a stain on the white linen of the nation,  
weakness inherent,  
to be soft is to be useless.  
Because if a woman is low,  
then a transwoman is worthless.

At the vigil we light candles, braid ourselves into darkness,  
for lives so disposable not even the papers will print them,  
and yet  
a stranger still finds the audacity to call out my sister  
'HE was blocking my path!'

A list of names in a pocket,  
my footsteps sinking into the pools of light left behind  
by the stranger before me,  
a ribbon of bowed heads and thick woolen jackets.  
Backs and shoulders, eyelashes and the curve of a neck,

women battered, burned, dismembered,  
left crumpled in ditches and laid out behind churches,  
and all I can see is the strangers around me  
their delicate bodies  
the grief that spills through our fingers and collects at our feet,  
sea foam or snow that melts at the heat of our touch,  
and so we speak their names,  
the shallow proof of all that once was.

For all my sisters who languish in men's prisons  
for the simple, revolutionary act of gracing the streets  
with their heavenly bodies.  
For all my sisters who lose words,  
starting with family,  
starting with hands held in public and bare legs against church pews,  
starting with freedom  
and ending with dignity.  
For all my sisters born  
into a nation that crosses  
fingers behind backs and maintains  
All Are Equal.

Women like the wishbone  
my mother kept on the windowsill by the garden,  
till it was dry and polished,  
in my hands it weighed nothing.  
If you break off the big half you will be lucky,  
but my sisters are never lucky.

And yet, my sister,  
I see her,  
wreath of wild chicory in her hair,  
Queen Anne's lace at her throat,  
head held high.  
Beauty so divine, America cannot stand how she walks  
naked through rosebushes  
and not a thorn will scathe her.

America steals back what it thinks it can own,  
but no one  
can own her elegance,  
she alone shall wear it on her lips,  
even in death.  
On her breasts glimmer shards of the night,  
dark petals on an unrippled lake,  
seeds long sown in patient soil  
bloom around her  
like tattered crepe paper,

a circle of fire,  
they flutter and unfurl in the gust.

Alone in a grove,  
her naked skin is the tongue  
that seals shut the envelope of the night,  
inside it every dream she has dreamt,  
every word she has lost,  
every blossom pressed flat.

She walks into the blaze,  
the backs of her knees silky like dogwood flowers,  
the flames eat pine and persimmon,  
ravage parched creek beds  
and spit at the moon,  
but not one dares touch her,  
her soles damp on the small of the back of the earth,  
fire unspools about her,  
her sweet skin and her breath and the breath of the sky  
and the petals lie still on her breast.