

GABRIELLE DANIELS

From *SOMETHING ELSE AGAIN: POETRY AND PROSE, 1975-2019* (Materials Press, 2020)

WHEN THE SMOKE CLEARS

*For Ya Haddy Sisi Saye aka Khadija Saye,
artistic photographer (1992-2017)*

When the smoke clears
there are lumps, charred clothing, human
meat and bones separating, melding to things
that once had other forms and other uses
or turned completely to ash,
where there should be people with faces,
slumbering between the alarm clock
or the newborn's wail, the Bengali
argued in corridors, and under sheets
this time their color doesn't divide the neighborhood
color that barely clads the curling flesh

Was the kitchen your only studio? The bathroom?
The wet, shiny photographs hanging on the lines
strung across the room like tongues
of sepia or monochrome, holy and native
the tub full of water with squeak toys and sponges
in the corners happening to fall in,
wanting to be part of the experience
the kitchen table overwhelmed
with pans of chemicals, with the chairs taking up the slack
and taping blankets or sheets to the windows
to urge artifice in the dark
on a sunny day, bringing pictures into being,
making magic with the camera
your mirror

I'll bet your mum was patient, when she understood
Her cooking must've bathed the apartment
vied with the aromas of the pots downstairs
and next door, wiping the fumes clean with Gambia,
as if scrubbing the steps to your door, magic rising
like incense smoke from the cow horn
and the amulet medicine and muse.
Now every apartment has become an oven
that cooked the dreams from everyone's sleep
while staying in place
 stasis,
 inertia,
 torpor,
stillness
dwelling in their space they could not breathe

As she looked down from the 20th floor,
sometimes marveling in the view of her city,
she was not taken in by that mirage. She

and her mother were at Grenfell—that island—
by grace not god's. Around them was £20 soap,
the suspicions of the coppers,
empty, crumbling houses worth more
off the market than roofing lives,
amid new modern slapdash none of her neighbors
could afford. Success was coming towards her
its matchless fingers primed for embrace,
but she hadn't made it yet,
there was no one and nothing to whom
she felt superior, she gloried in the next achievement,
and the next, and the next. It was still illumination
lighting every pore

That perfection is what she had created,
and where she had finished;
she was humble before acclaim, overawed even,
laughing and smiling like the round child
she still was. Her art was not an idol
that she worshipped, apart and speechless
she spoke her brilliance from within
Wrongfully arrested, the police kept her cell phone
though exonerated; they took away her voice to call out
to call for rescue. Gone may be the negatives,
the dead ends, the false fronts,
the revelations, gone may be the crowns

yet that fire remains
that fire

[NOTE: Ya Haddy Sisi Saye, aka Khadija Saye, a photographer, died in the Grenfell Tower fire in London in June 2017 at the age of 24, having previously been harassed by police on false accusations. Her work has since been displayed in Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, and Tate Britain. Below are images from her series *In This Space We Breathe*, on display at the British Library in London.]



D.S. (DAVID) MARRIOTT

From *BEFORE WHITENESS* (City Lights, 2022)

ANOTHER BURNING

this paper is on fire

being
human, as it incinerates itself
lit from within –
as if being of earth
was itself to be earthed,
a shock: a final, purifying stroke,
lighting up
the most dangerous approach.
descending.
this paper is on fire
and the earth is a room
inside the flames

incinerare
breathed
like a rope of air
where we took
our final, faltering steps
down smoke-filled stairs,
down narrow corridors
a roaring in our ears
openmouthed, blindsided,
our throats already burning
from the portrayal.

And I
like you

among the mute, the breathless, *g*
the thrice-taken denials
never promise enough.
like a forest you struggle through, *r*
waiting, penned in –
can't you hear it
approaching ,
the crumbling columns of desuetude *e*
the summits heaving, sweating
out surprising wisps of air?
like an exhalation rushing over rags, you, roadmen, *n*
doused & sussed,
uttering the tolls
for the longest journey. *f*
like a word
falling easily through inflamed lips – *e*
blackness
wasn't in the language – we saw it *l*
being evacuated
but we still inhabited
the ashes. *l*

the obscure, obsolescent
threshold
never entered,
already neglected, never spotted, never grasped.

the *impasse* – unable to go up or down
in the prosaic light of faith, tiptoeing
to catastrophe.

words
falling
ever
downwards (the air on fire)

(and as we stumble forward,
a vacuum:
we breathed in its ferocity)

to fall, like
a word,
a word not yet
fallen, but burning,
separated,
unable to cross from landing to safety –
a fall
that has not yet happened:

*the breath
that you don't own
is not yours
to breathe –*

hear them: the long doomed
iftar, the already ashen bolari,
and, in the black smoke,
a discarded *belgha* left
lying in the ruins –

each sentence meaningless

as tall burning buildings loom –
and time ceases,
staggered by fear & shame –
a storey in each story
(each falling). the
story is the storey
within the building
built on charred names.

at the end of the
day, dust
settling, breathed in,
as each gaze turns away,
and there's nothing
to distinguish a tower from an incinerated outline.

This paper is on fire
lifted out into
the void
into lives lived without air.

the unknown heights

recognized in rooms where there is no
emergency exit.
there is no trace, for here,
everything is lost
trapped without rescue:

and each room
is a cliff where we are
perched on
a rim of burning flame,

and each door
is a vista where we shall
be shipped back to the blaze

brought back to the unknown
shore
 like birds
 returning back
to the unachieved seas,
 the untold *dis*
 of our dear fallen
 heirs
 transported from earth into air.
and the fire breaking in
waves – a sea from which we were never
meant to be rescued, or leave: every sentence, then,
a station of the last: the buckle
that stays because it can't be grasped –
still, the tower stood there, still, beyond mere sorrow,
beyond what may be told and what may not,
beyond the burning calms, and each soul a window
illuminated by their petrifying ripostes, reflected
on the melting surfaces, the spines of what
will survive us: both scaffold and shipwreck –
as the more dangerous storeys become air and violet
breaths, and each spark an oblivious brute annulment
of the white glare of departure.
 whiteness
 the height that rains
 and sets to right the rightless
 ingloried
 leaven
 as we flame out,
 burnt to a crisp –
incinerare –
 the whiteness of place unplaced
 beyond
 language, the last refuge
 of loss –
 and the unburned
 waiting awaited
 word
 cast out without hope
 or arrival.
 this paper is on fire
poetry is a medium, a building,
its cladding explodes *here*,
over tumbling heaven-drenched air:
this paper burns itself, it ascends
 over the
 black shadowless stains –
and what it unveils it eradicates.
the lives lifelessly resident in the unlived house
where no one wants to live, towering
 over what ceases
in the flames,
 the charred remains
rising beyond thresholds
 of belonging, unliving.
 incinerare –
 it rapidly crosses the open
 the remains inside the ear
 that crosses what passes on –

blackness sifted, blanched,
let go, dumped, left in dismay.

g *r* *l*
 e
n *e*
 f *l*

this paper is on fire

it cannot breathe
 it will crumble
 into dust
like a building
 that forms itself
 into a word
 the tap tapping of an
ashen wing
 that frees itself
 from everything that is air,
 O my unhoused Chevalier!
become a weightless slave
 that no room confines
 and no refuge,
 as if fire were speaking itself:
the word *due*
 expectant but so ruinously
 unplanned,
a kind of death-trap
 for
 the word *owing*—
 to grasp in order to never be grasped
 by the ungrasped *always*,
 suspended, freed,
from descent as well as any rescue
 lived for,
 the paper, unwilling.

descent meant rescue,
 but there was black smoke
all around us,
 and our mistake was in thinking
that language meant
 expectancy or survival –
and not something endlessly abandoned,
 evacuated.
a word petrified, then cracked.
 a void endlessly imprinted,
 shaped into concrete.

for you and I