The History of Red

BY LINDA HOGAN

First
there was some other order of things
never spoken
but in dreams of darkest creation.

Then there was black earth,
lake, the face of light on water.
Then the thick forest all around
that light,
and then the human clay
whose blood we still carry
rose up in us
who remember caves with red bison
painted in their own blood,
after their kind.

A wildness
swam inside our mothers,
desire through closed eyes,
a new child
wearing the red, wet mask of birth,
delivered into this land
already wounded,
stolen and burned
beyond reckoning.

Red is this yielding land
turned inside out
by a country of hunters
with iron, flint and fire.
Red is the fear
that turns a knife back
against men, holds it at their throats,
and they cannot see the claw on the handle,
the animal hand
that haunts them
from some place inside their blood.

So that is hunting, birth,
and one kind of death.
Then there was medicine, the healing of wounds.
Red was the infinite fruit
of stolen bodies.
The doctors wanted to know
what invented disease
how wounds healed
from inside themselves
how life stands up in skin,
if not by magic.

They divined the red shadows of leeches
that swam in white bowls of water:
they believed stars
in the cup of sky.
They cut the wall of skin
to let
what was bad escape
but they were reading the story of fire
gone out
and that was a science.

As for the animal hand on death’s knife,
knives have as many sides
as the red father of war
who signs his name
in the blood of other men.

And red was the soldier
who crawled
through a ditch
of human blood in order to live.
It was the canal of his deliverance.
It is his son who lives near me.
Red is the thunder in our ears
when we meet.
Love, like creation,
is some other order of things.

Red is the share of fire
I have stolen
from root, hoof, fallen fruit.
And this was hunger.

Red is the human house
I come back to at night
swimming inside the cave of skin
that remembers bison.
In that round nation
of blood
we are all burning,
red, inseparable fires
the living have crawled
and climbed through
in order to live
so nothing will be left
for death at the end.

This life in the fire, I love it.
I want it,
this life.

Source: The Book of Medicines (Coffee House Press, 1993)