



## Aubade with Burning City

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*South Vietnam, April 29, 1975: Armed Forces Radio played Irving Berlin's "White Christmas" as a code to begin Operation Frequent Wind, the ultimate evacuation of American civilians and Vietnamese refugees by helicopter during the fall of Saigon.*

Milkflower petals on the street  
like pieces of a girl's dress.

*May your days be merry and bright...*

He fills a teacup with champagne, brings it to her lips.

*Open*, he says.

She opens.

Outside, a soldier spits out  
his cigarette as footsteps  
fill the square like stones fallen from the sky. *May all  
your Christmases be white* as the traffic guard  
unstraps his holster.

His hand running the hem  
of her white dress.

His black eyes.

Her black hair.

A single candle.

Their shadows: two wicks.

A military truck speeds through the intersection, the sound of children  
shrieking inside. A bicycle hurled  
through a store window. When the dust rises, a black dog  
lies in the road, panting. Its hind legs  
crushed into the shine  
*of a white Christmas.*

On the nightstand, a sprig of magnolia expands like a secret heard  
for the first time.

*The treetops glisten and children listen*, the chief of police  
facedown in a pool of Coca-Cola.  
A palm-sized photo of his father soaking  
beside his left ear.

The song moving through the city like a widow.  
*A white... A white... I'm dreaming of* a curtain of snow  
falling from her shoulders.

Snow crackling against the window. Snow shredded  
with gunfire. Red sky.  
Snow on the tanks rolling over the city walls.  
A helicopter lifting the living just out of reach.

The city so white it is ready for ink.

The radio saying run run run.  
Milkflower petals on a black dog  
like pieces of a girl's dress.

*May your days be merry and bright.* She is saying  
something neither of them can hear. The hotel rocks  
beneath them. The bed a field of ice  
cracking.

*Don't worry*, he says, as the first bomb brightens  
their faces, *my brothers have won the war*  
*and tomorrow...*  
The lights go out.

*I'm dreaming. I'm dreaming...*  
*to hear sleigh bells in the snow...*

In the square below: a nun, on fire,  
runs silently toward her god —

*Open*, he says.  
She opens.

Source: *Poetry* (February 2014)