

CASSANDRA

With your swampy voice, your electric hair,
rhythm of reeds tideswayed in the rivershallows,
sinuous strings, sidemen on the bank keeping the beat,
you sing bad news with a sound of sweet illusions, of doom
that is not a disaster but merely inevitable, what anyone would expect
if they took a deep look at the evidence everywhere, beauty and truth
entwined with death, cruelty on the loose, tenderness barely enduring
under the lash of chaos muted by coercion—those rules
even the stupid can understand—and out of such murky depths
some lovely myth may rise in song to beggar disbelief.
Those who hear you are bound by a weird spell, swept downstream
from the blue music of their misery through currents of unexpected
syncopation, which twist perception, wring the grief-soaked soul
into streams of grateful relief, torrents of pleasure
that move at crosspurposes against the grave eddies of fate.
What are you trying to prove, that what we believe
to be given is bound to flee, that from devastation flows
creation unfettered by mere facts, that emanations of incomparable sound
transcend defeat, floating into a zone where even tragedy is redeemed?
Your prophecy is not lost on me, Cassandra,
your phrasing is too persuasive, your timing
too bittersweet to dispute. I believe you, babe,
whatever the gods, so self-absorbed
as to ignore our sufferings,
have up their sleeves.

—Stephen Kessler