

FIRE POEMS

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The Woman on the Porch

The woman on the porch, described in the paper as "elderly" was also said "to like sleeping out on the porch in summer."

Sometimes, those long soft evenings in the summer city by the sea, a breeze would swing in from the bay bearing the sharp scent of salt marsh mixed with the smell of flowers from the yard below the porch.

She could imagine their colors in the dark, bright reds and yellows, purple, orange and green in patterns planted by the owners of the house who loved the wild colors with their fragrance wafting like mist from cooling ground onto the porch and on up into their open windows.

They loved her too, she thought, the owners of the house, for cherishing the cultivated chaos they'd created back behind the austere front of that old place. She thought they knew she hid her colors too behind her face. They were the age her children might have been. It comforted her to know that they were there, the owners, clicking out their lights and going to sleep, while in the garden, roses, wild stemming cosmos, lilies, fluted marigolds tucked down in beds, sent fragrance lifting up to touch her porch that night in summer.

They said that she was *fond of using candles*. This is true. The sweet illusion they created when she slept out on the cot that she was in a cottage somewhere—summer on the Cape when she was eight, hearing her parents softly talking on the creaking swing— that lullaby of lapping waves, lumbering luna moths beating the screen and fireflies outside— watching them wink off and on in rhythm like the lighthouse beacons in the bay. And then in Maine, when she was twelve and old enough to sleep away— that camp with the long Indian name she has forgotten, and the screened porch from which ten giggling girls had dared the dark by sneaking down the stony path to shore with only candlelight to see by — the counselor discovered them, of course, had scolded, scurried them to bed, and taken all the candles.

And then those special evenings with her husband
after the dinner guests had gone, the flickering tapers
spreading amber light upon the china plates embossed
with twining vines. They'd sit in that soft wavering light,
finish the wine and talk until the candles spit and guttered out
and darkness wooed them to sleep.

She was not lonely now – she'd tell you that.
She had a cat, haughty and august, who came
to join her on the porch, leapt on the railing, clicking claws on wood,
swishing his tail so close to candle that she thought he had a dare to see
how close he'd come before he singed his hide. He never did.

The candles that she burned out on the table on the porch
were cupped in glass for safety, smokeless, not the scented kind,
so she could smell the wind, the flowers.
Wrapped in her old chenille robe, snuggled under the covers
like flowers tucked in beds, she felt companioned in the night,
she knew the life around her – sleeping bees and small things
stirring in the tufted grass–the couple sleeping up above,
the humming groaning sounds of the great city,
softened by night.

And something else: she loved the darkness for its lure
but also needed safety. She felt safe because of them,
the people on the floor above. She knew intruders
could not climb the outside wall to reach the porch.
Still, she placed the phone nearby, the candle,
welcomed the cat beside her as she slept.

It was the smell that woke her, not the flames.
That night some wandering gust of wind, or platelets
in the deep earth shifting, or bad luck, tipped the candle
over to the floor and onto papers
she had read the night before. They blazed.

The old wood tinderred. Fire reached out for her
and immediately alert, she did what she remembered being told to do a
nd threw her bedding down to smother it, then ran for water, panicked
now,
and crying “No !” but by the time she'd stumbled back, tripping on her
robe,
the flames had slipped the covers like a naughty kid hell bent for Sunday,
water was useless and she finally grabbed the phone and called for help.

Too late, the aging row house flared up like a waiting match,
 the railings of the porch, her bedding, turned to fire
 and hissing, scaled the wall to higher floors, slid in the windows
 of the ones upstairs, seeking the wife who just that day had gathered
 lilies for her tenant, orange and yellow in a green vase, left them
 outside the downstairs door where now they spilled crushed
 under feet escaping from the fire which stalked the wife and took her
 choking at the stairwell trying to reach her husband wake and warn him
 of the fire seeking the husband who had gone to bed, planning a full day in
 the morning, planning a course he was to teach planning to wake up early
 planning to wake up.

Under the makeshift blankets, cringing down against the whine of sirens
 and the whirling blue and yellow lights, the tenant watches salt wind suck
 the fire into sky. Gasping to breathe and given pills by people briefly kind,
 she only later learns of what the fire had taken –the wife dead, the husband
 comatose, their kids–boys off at schools– bereft.

They did not have tell her more–she knew the source
 of the tsunami sweeping the broken webs of others
 who had loved the people who had lived upstairs.

She had no place to go the paper said and left her there.
 Perhaps she's living somewhere in the city by the sea,
 the woman on the porch who loved
 the quiet night, the warmth of candlelight,
 her neighbors, and in the dark
 the rising scent of flowers.

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The Cat and the Fire

I was not lost, I left,
 leapt to the railing, tree branch
 shed roof, ground. (They won't
 have thought of that.)
 My bones elastic, was unscathed
 well, accidental singeing of the fur,
 no more than when I've switched my tail
 over a candle, or prowling across
 a lit stove, the flame.

I watched the fire
 from the edge of the back garden,
 tucked into flowers until they wilted down.
 They did not see me, my yellow eyes eclipsed
 by that exploding incandescence,
 I meant not to be seen. High words for a cat perhaps,
 but they were readers, all of them, upstairs and down,
 so all the words I pushed against, or sat on all those years
 seep in the paws.

I think of her, of course. How she was warm
 and kind and constant, and I catch
 her reaching thoughts of me from time to time
 I thought of her that night, once I was safe from fire
 in my own skin, wondered about hers, investigated,
 saw her on the street wrapped up in blankets,
 all those people and the flashing lights.
 Then I knew our time had ended, so I left.

I'm in another place now. Tell her that
 I was not lost.
 I just was never found.

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What the Fire Said

expect of me nothing and everything
 i have only one need
 to burn

more verb than noun language
 does not enclose me

i am a process not a line of layers
 which when you see them

make stories in your mind

you strike the match you
 light the candle you
 think you
 make the fire

no
you are the hand upon the door
to what is
always here
i am

never
not
burning within the cell
of lover corpse and flower

and, yes i scaled with ease that wall
the burgler could not climb i licked
the railings sizzled ivy melted eaves
the curl of paper succored
to my seeking tongue

indifferent and indiscriminate
the fringe
of rug
the magazines and books
they read
the clothing
flesh
and stories
same
to me all
same to me

you
shut me up in glass and steel boxes
you
think containment is control but
you
are burning from inside

and do not know
you know me
but you do

we
are this hunger to consume
eating time

remember this

you do not own me or control
the burn of me in you

lover destroyer same
destroyer lover

same

THE ARBOR

Clipping them back they still climb everywhere
I planted leafy corridor with him to hold the
tendrils of a marriage that would last the weather,
safe harbor for me, a family for my kids,
but he did not twine long with me, he
brambled round my girl
and almost
took her down

These roots– I try to rid my land of them–persist
as in the cells and tissues of my child
his night-time touch insinuates its pattern
in her daytime rages

The arbor is long gone,
the harbor too
still, in my life, he surfaces, a shipwreck of a man
washed up in unexpected places
a twine of ligament to thwart the tender
stems of lilac in the spring, I trace vine down to root
and once again pull up
and cast away, pull up and cast
away knowing full well these roots will rise
another place
another day

Time of the Onion

What's the difference between a band-aid
and an onion? asks the man walking into a bar.

The bartender pours two shots but has no answer.
The man either. They drink themselves
out of the question.

Here's my shot- without the whiskey:
Pulling off the band-aid hurts,
you're plucking hair from tender skin
to open what is wounded to the air
which heals it. Pain stops. You go on.

But when you peel an onion, there's another layer to lift back,
and then another and another on down to the green nub, then
nothing. Just onion. Onion.

And meanwhile, you are weeping and weeping as the onion wind
sucks all your story out and you are wordless, weeping story
from your eyes, peeling your memory back until,
just like those hollow wooden dolls tucked into one another
-armless so they can't gesture "stop" to keep from getting
smaller-it is far enough and there is
nothing, rising.

*One day I will wake up beneath an ordinary sun
and will not think of you, not need my layered mind
to peel down to the core where our story
will be -oh god of love and onions- done.*