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## Father's Fire

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Father's Fire

He'd burn anything  
at that blackened hearth—  
sheaves of schoolwork, chicken bones,  
the phone book, dead goldfish. He'd squat  
at the fireplace, his mealy white heels  
tipped up from his slippers, his stout  
back curved like the arch  
of filthy brick. He'd build a temple  
of worm-bored dead wood  
and the week's news twisted into wicks,  
all soused with lighter fluid.  
Once, as he struck  
a match off the sandy mortar,  
patches of odd-colored flame  
sprang up all along his robe.  
Furious, he jerked the garment off,  
balled it up still blazing,  
and fed it in. His fires never started

gently, with procrastinant wood  
slow to kindle, small paws of flame  
curling up from the andiron.  
The whole rack of scabby logs,  
tinderous dry paper, pinecones  
gummy with flammable resins,  
would ignite in a great contagion  
of fire. Fire scaled up the chimney,  
slapped out toward the mantle.  
When the platform of kindling fell in,  
some hulking log would drop  
and tumble onto the rug, sodden with flame,  
dribbling red sparks. He'd pinch  
and lever it back in, beating  
the smoky carpet with the flat  
of a shovel. All the house would swell  
with cauldronic heat, fire sucking in

any breathable air. Then he'd shove  
up the windows, a train of frigid  
wind driving in, curtains suctioned  
unnaturally back against the screens.

One Christmas, the chemical flare  
of wrap & foil couldn't satisfy,  
and he gave the fire our Christmas tree,  
star-end first. Fire laced around  
each spruce needle, faithful to the tracery  
of branches, racing loose down  
the sawn trunk. The few ornaments  
detonated at the blunt insult of heat,  
and tinsel shriveled like burnt hair. We'd wake  
the next mornings, throats scalded & sore,  
rancid grit along our lashes,  
and slink out like lizards  
to see what fire had done.  
We might find a mirror spangled  
with webby cracks; shrapnel  
from a burst bottle riveted  
into the couch; fine furry ash  
thick as mold on the floor; once,  
the pet bird roasted in her cage.

Set to mucking out the hearth,  
we'd prospect through the cinders  
for the past night's history: a photograph  
skeletonized into a fragile, filmy face,  
a knot of scorched fur, a melted  
doll's foot. Finally, the brick altar  
was swept bare, ready  
for father's next fire,  
which he would feed anything,  
*anything* he hoped would burn.

—holly lu conant rees