Spring 1997

What Fire Wants

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WHAT FIRE WANTS

She rides the trolley down St. Charles and into the evening, staring into the shiver and twist of flames in the gas lamps, the flickering doorways, and thinks the fire’s shawl of light strains to open,

until, at last, she sees her father beneath the consummation of smoke and dust drifting from a rural road a few years before he died, the narrow strings of flame dragging through the grass, combing it down, untangling it into ash, into what fire wants of things. She wanted to step a little closer, to feel the tender pulse of heat like the blood ticking the lines of her wrist, but her father waved her back. The fire flushed grackles into the sprawling mesh of smoke, and they squelched warnings the way a radio spits from a car as it turns down a street and into the city. But it isn’t enough,

the splinter of a song. Or the lamps. No, she wants to tell how her father walked into that field, the smoke draping like muslin walls, until she could only see the taut threads of fire and the black birds torn from gray sheets. But the man slumped next to her glances again and again at her hands where they pool in her lap, and she’ll tell him nothing, not that her father wanted to know how it felt to stand

in the field’s unscorched center and watch the closing flames, that he left her, a child, to wait and do nothing but watch him disappear . . . though instead of waiting she imagined her father
collecting strands of fire, imagined he tied them into a flashing blanket he would bring . . . Now she says nothing, and slowly shuts her eyes to the flames gesturing from the doorways of houses—*stay*,

*stay back*—and she feels the car the car filling with grackles. They settle on the vacant seats to hunt for string and thread to weave their nests of what's lost, and call out with voices like hinges.