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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.