

A House Burning

by Matthew Keefer

What would you take, what would you leave?

It's a large house. It's an old mansion: the old wing has collapsed, no one ventures there anymore; the new wing, that has been vacant for years; the servants' quarters, crowded, where we live now.

Or used to. Until the fire came through.

We're adaptable creatures, ultimately. But to a point. You can't bring cattle into a desert; a bird does not fly through the ocean. Inside, there is fire: outside, what is there? Is there anything to adapt to?

Have we even seen that world?

Food, clothing, each other. We're staring at the fire, but we didn't know it would be dark; outside the fire it is dark. Candlesticks — but no, it's too late to go back. Shelter, too: something more than the overcrowded caves, off in the distance. Shoes, perhaps.

It is dark out.

We were used to a lot of things. A lot of conveniences we took for granted. Food, clothing; each other. We definitely took each other for granted. Especially when it grew dark, when the mood was right to tell stories in that dark, lying back, propped up on a pillow. When I thought of the comfort that might come if you'd only cross over, come off your bed into mine.

But that is long ago. It is the fire now.

It's what there is. What is left. Its thick lips and long tongues, licking and biting what was once ours. It is hungry; it is always hungry. It is light, too, pain to our eyes, pain to see it flicker out and die in the coals, I am sure. I turn away. The fumes...

When will the sun come out?

The bureau, the fights, the dancing. There won't be dancing, anymore. That isn't true, that can't be true; but there is no floor to dance on, you know?

Things we should have left: the money, our IDs. We know who we are. We know where we're from. We know what we've been through: trudging, dragging feet through thick muck; the insults, the insinuations, the sneers; fingers, wagging, heads, wagging. We've heard it all, and it's passed through us. Sometimes it's just easier to believe.

Easier than seeing what's really going on. The fire: it has always been there. It started in the corner, that old wing, but no one ventures there, no one but ghosts and mice and flames. We were too busy keeping our heads down, telling ourselves the black smoke was harmless. Trying to drag through the muck, like a dance partner, listen to those shouted insults, pretending them music. And here we are. The fire. More of us are turning away, now.

It's out there. Out in the pitch. Was the sun always like this?

Faith, hope. Ourselves. We failed individually; we are individual failures. They never mentioned history: bands of hunter-gatherers; families of farmers; a phalanx of soldiers. Failures together are even bigger failures, apparently, each individual failing balled into more. They never mentioned that failure balled into failure balled into success; but they never had to say that. We just assumed the opposite.

They let us assume.

We can blame a lot on them. We can blame them those haughty looks beaming down from those portraits; we can blame them, yes, for that old cigar that never quite put out in the old wing. We can blame and point and shout.

Not that the dark would listen. Or the flames, either.

But here we are, the last turned away from the fire, from the all-consuming. Burnt in our eyes; burned in our hearts. A true heart never came from anything more than ashes. There is that, at least.

Do I know the answer? Do you? We don't, either.

But I do know a direction. And a purpose.

There is a pace.

There is a lot to accomplish, yet. Too much. But there is a joke,
too.

How do you eat an elephant? (It is my mother's.)

One bite at a time.

Perhaps that joke will last the first mile, perhaps you will think of something next (something mean, something dirty? It doesn't matter, something you). But there is a pace, and with that, hope and riches and fears. And love, if there is time.

Can you smell it?

It is dark out.

But already the air breathes cooler...

