



Philip Gross

Phlogiston

1.

How does fire do it – prop
the ladder of itself against the air,
 then climb it?
I must study this, in passing.

2.

A thin
twig in the embers
flexes, as if waking.
It fills from the inside
as with sap, with the burning.
You could almost believe it: Fire
is a kind of life; life is a kind of fire.

3.

We call it hungry, call it
 wild – what swings
from branch to branch tip of the spitting
eucalyptus
 or drops
on all fours in the brushwood
snuffling up the in-draught of a hunger –

oxygen.
The drunk kids scatter, shrieking with half-laughter.
No stopping it now
or them ever
or us,
sucked in, consumed too, though we call it
curiosity.

4.

No wonder we talk about *playing*
hose-jets on the conflagration.
Fire
and water recognise each other
from way back, a shared childhood.
Is this dancing?
See them rush into each other's arms.

5.

They were bombing the sea.
I saw this, as a boy –
off Land's End – low above our hollow hip-hoo-
rays, strike after strike:
Buccaneers, Hunter Harriers, Sea Vixens, (yes,
I could name them). The broke-
back tanker smeeched; the slick spread; fire too
can be unwilling to be pressed...

6.

... just as forty years later, slow
bellies of smoke
dragging over the hills: the foot-and-mouth

pyres sluggish. Lost
up a backroad home,
we glimpsed a slick
of slack flame across the valley,
goaded by a line of silhouettes
in armour, their flamethrowers
out at it like cattle prods.
Trucks with tarpaulined payloads
thumped past up the lane;
We slewed to the verge. *Don't*
look, we told the children,
then we couldn't (could we?)
tear our gaze away.

7.

Fire is in the past tense
when the bright flags break out
like a victory parade
decreed.
The flame is already an *after*.
Blindfold, in the unmarked cell
or cellar, history, the deed
of fire is already done.

8.

Buddha's sermon
spoke about a house on fire.
Fire's own homily runs on this
one thing: its escape
from the house of the earth.

9.

The flames
 are doors
thrown open, the guests
 spilling out already
 with their heedless laughter
from the banquet, filled
 and never
fulfilled, where the carriages
 are waiting, black
 coach horses stamping;
off
 then, clattering,
their far
 spark deepening
 the night.

10.

Just as the paper gives in to weightless
 dissolution, see the ink's
fusewire-thin tangle hanging
 in the blaze, intact,
 as if her parting
message had been written on the flame.

11.

(Fire
counts in minutes
– carbon,
centuries...)

12.

In the end these
tongues I trust
 will speak me
 perfectly.
Nothing lost in the translation.

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