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Fall Burning

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Fall Burning

When she brought it to him, wrapped in paper
gray as skin and greased with rain,
his finger lay heavy on the printed word. The news
filled him with a kind of dread, the black of broken
street lamps. The word he was following was *ash*,
a story about a fire, perhaps, pollution, the river
flooding beneath his feet. She stood
on his carpet, weeping, every fold of her an ebb.
It was because of the storm, her rain-webbed
hair and darkening shoes, that first he missed
the blood-jewels sating her step. Color ran through the ribs
of her hands. It took the both of them
to strip the wet layers and find its beating heart:
a pigeon, pink-eyed, wild. Between two
cars its wings had worked like a valve, its mouth,
opened and closed, dumb. So making love to her
that night, the attar of blood, rust-thick, was little surprise,
a red line through her body, twisting as smoke
between her legs. He touched her with marked flesh. He stood
up from the bed and the evidence lay as heavy as scent,
wax prints on the old quilt, a chronology of touch.
He burned the bird in a barrel with the papers
and leaves he'd been saving, slick flames beating close
to the lines. He watched the red calm to black.
The sky flushed between two trees, and still, the musk of smoke
clung to his hands. He buried his breath in her hair.
He held her shoulders, and his fingers made florid marks
where they lay, and her bones were as small and sharp as wings.

—Alison Stine '00