The Arithmetic of Ash

poems

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Ash remembers what fire forgets.

When Fire Learned to Count

Before language chose me,
fire already had.
Not a word,
but a syntax.
A flicker learning how to mean
without permission.

I met it first as light
balanced on a wick,
a small sun practising restraint.
I leaned in, not out of defiance
but inquiry.
What happens if I cross
what glows?

My finger learned faster than my mind,
and my mother’s hand arrived
like punctuation,
ending a sentence
no one had warned me was dangerous.

Later, winter spoke in flames.
Behind glass, fire became legible,
a moving text
written in orange, blue, gold.
Log after log translated itself
into heat
that asked nothing of me.

I watched for hours,
reading without letters,
learning that beauty can be relentless
and still be true.
When I was trusted with ignition,

I mistook repetition for mastery.
Strike.
Wait.
Listen.
Sometimes fire withdraws mid-sentence.

There are numbers that do not count,
they announce.
Twenty five entered the room
before anyone spoke.

Not arithmetic
but impact.
A sound before a thought.
Five and twenty
breaking against walls,
against breath,
against the sour geometry of alcohol
turning love feral.

Whenever violence entered the room,
that number arrived first,
like a bell rung inside the skull,
marking an ending
that refused to stay in the past.

So fire learned to count with me.
Not one.
Not two.
Threshold.
After.

Much later,
at the edge of a year
already heavy with endings,
the mind rehearsed a picture
too luminous to ignore.

Not a plan.
An image.
A convergence.

Fire and liquid,
passion and refusal,
meeting where names are carved in stone
and silence pretends to be eternal.
A fantasy of symmetry.
A wish for closure
posing as consent.

Twenty five
closing itself
like a mouth.

But fire, again,
did not ask to be acted upon.
It only asked
to be seen.
And seeing, this time,
cost nothing but the letting go.

What remains
is not the act
but the attraction.
The way some numbers
sleep lightly.

This is not where the story burns.
It is where it learns what it cannot take with it.

To Rise Without Leaving Her Behind

I speak as the one left behind,
the daughter who still feels her mother’s hands
shaping the boundaries of her world.

I walk through days carrying a grief so hot
it sometimes feels like a calling,
a pull toward the flames where I imagine she waits.
But she is not a fire
that demands my sacrifice.

Am I supposed to rise as her phoenix
or let myself fall into ashes
so we can share the same dust?

What burns in me
is not only sorrow
but the fear
that living without her
means losing her twice:
once to death,
once to time.

Yet I also fear
the silence that would follow
if I stopped walking altogether.

I miss her prayers whispered into the night,
Het gaat lukken. Ik geloof in u, mijn engeltje.
her faith, the same hand
that once stopped me at the flame,
now pressed against my back,
guiding me forward,
believing for me
when I could not believe for myself.

She prayed that I would rise,
and every rising counts twice:
once as loyalty,
once as betrayal.
Each breath I take
is a step away from her
and a step into the life
she will never contradict.

The Phoenix I Never Asked to Become

There is a fire that settled in me quietly,
not as flame
but as aftermath.
Something left behind
when her breathing finally loosened its grip
on the night.

She slept at last,
carried by medicine into a gentler distance,
and the world pretended, briefly,
that waiting was still possible.

Downstairs, time thinned.
One cigarette.
Its smoke curled upward,
fragile, temporary,
indifferent to our hope.

Before it burned down,
the silence broke
without ceremony.
A voice, stripped of warmth,
delivered the inevitable
in words too small
for what they erased:
dat hét gebeurd was.

From that moment on,
everything burned differently.
What I held
became proof.
What I refused
became
question.

I had believed love meant restraint,
shielding her from discomfort,
choosing care over closeness.

Now I wonder
whether love sometimes asks
to stay inside the discomfort,
to share the breath
until there is no breath
left to share.

That doubt
is my inheritance.
It does not shout.
It smoulders.

When I imagine rising,
something in me recoils.
When I imagine falling apart,
something else leans forward.

Between those impulses
lives the life she wanted for me
and the absence
she left behind.

I never asked to become a phoenix.
I wanted no other wings
than the ones she gave me
when she called me *mijn engeltje*.

Yet here I am,
carrying heat without spectacle,
learning how to burn
without disappearing.

Written between fire and ash

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