

Blaze

The unfunny irony of it became a family joke:
how she'd stood gossiping at the door with
– of all people at that fatal moment –
the insurance man.

5 Beyond the Providential¹ shoulder
half her attention's on her white border:
cool blooms, shades of everything cold.
She waves to a neighbour sailing out with her pram.
Behind her, the dull safety of the house,
10 the half-known caverns of her children's bedrooms.

She chats, smiles at nothing much,
until the mordant reek of smoke
from the kitchen reaches him, then her.
Next, the clutch of panic checking all responses.
15 She watches flames run lovingly over everything,
brightness, then black, patterning her eyes.

What to save for whom.
Photographs, toys or letters?
She scoops the cat and his one last little life
20 from the bathtub upstairs.

She tells of the heat, describes the hungry fire
to her stony-faced husband,
the raging beauty of it, the glorious energy –
You should have seen. It was like drowning in light!
25 but he finds no excuses for her.
Does her survival mean a thing to him?

Next day, her children laugh
at shapes of melted Tupperware² and glass.
They eat cold meals from the garage freezer
30 and whisper their relief.
She's still trembling.
Everything in the kitchen's gone,
the treacherous toaster killed.
Time for a re-fit.
35 Time to re-think her life.

Christine West, www.poetryfoundation.org (2006)

¹ Providential: the Provident, a financial services organization

² Tupperware: plastic containers used for storing food