

Stephen Robertson

Fire

My sign is Aries. Though it seems a poor
fit for me, it is at least a Fire.
The others too I love—Earth, Water, Air—but Fire
is something else again.

A memory
(nineteen-sixty-one or so—my teens—already
between the end of the Chatterley ban
and the Beatles' first LP;
strangely, though, not sex but fire).

See this:
the large, dilapidated country house
that is my mother's next big venture after
producing six of us.
L-shaped the house; enclosed within its arms
a walled garden, left untended
for maybe thirty years. A winding path
leads from the glazed back door
through box and holly grown to full maturity
to an iron-gated pointed arch
piercing the wall, built like the house
of weathered Cotswold stone.

The box and holly
were magnificent, but could not be allowed
to remain in occupation of that space.
And so, for two successive summer holidays,
we chopped and sawed and dug and then set fire to
the produce of our labours.

A box or holly root, smouldering slowly,
will burn for ever. The fire once begun
would last for days and days. Each morning I came down,
expecting to find it cold, but every day
the embers beneath the ash were darkly glowing, asking only
a slight encouragement. As the day went on,
we generated quantities of fuel
and built a roaring blaze. Then late into the night
I fed it all the bits that it had missed:
fragments around the edges of the blaze.

Even now,
I feel the heat upon my face.

Twenty three years later, when my mother died
we had the proper formal funeral.
(She had chosen the music for the ceremony
—a Schubert piano piece.)
Standing around the Cambridge crematorium,
dressed for the occasion,
we read the flower-borne messages
and talked to relatives not seen for years.

It had to be, but it was not the memory we needed.
So three months later, we met again
on a Suffolk shingle beach.
In November the days were short,
and dark night fell as we built and lit the fire
on the dark stones, and planted fireworks
in the dark edges beyond the flickering light.

Nearly-five-year-old Colin
needed a lavatory, and I had to leave the fire for a while
to take him to the house.
I always regretted, felt cheated by
that twenty-minute hiatus.

But the fire bore us no grudge,
and welcomed us back into its glow.

Another twenty one years,
another crematorium.
This time Judith has chosen the music,
a Beethoven string quartet.
Afterwards Colin and I go down to the basement
—the real crematorium—
and see her consigned to the flames.
(I completely understand why people have
funeral pyres.) Later we scatter the ashes
in a wild part of the old South London cemetery.

Perhaps I should plant
some box or holly.