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Smoke

Judith Moffett

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Smoke · Judith Moffett

C.H.D., 1909-1977

On doctor's orders you spent whole days
in bed, your cough so tearing
it wore you ragged. Double pneumonia.
All that dark fall
I brought your sickroom bright
seasonal trinkets, red
leaves or horse chestnuts I now see
must have struck you
as maddeningly beside the point.
One raw afternoon your raccoon coat
charged toward me in the street,
hesitated, pushed on defiant.
Out? In this weather? Guiltily
you pleaded stir-craziness, but at once I knew
from now on smoke would seep again
under the bathroom door.

Should I have tried to stop you
then and there? Beautiful, gaunt, smudge-eyed,
brittle tree of a woman,
as weak as furtive, might you have let me? I
whom you permitted
to nurse and shop, do laundry, make
beds and soups, who would have moved
mountains to have you well
or fallen trying, could not be asked to help you kill
yourself; but to stay by and keep still
rather than shame you, *that*
was possible—not that you thought it through!
Simply, a live-in jailor suited you,
and I
proved manageable. Not love but trust went up
in smoke forever.
Simply, we lived your lie.

Knowing your own ways, you chose this.
All the next autumn
passed in a hospital bed.
Cancer. Lung, then bone and brain;
white-gray waves a rolling
blur on the pillow, long shanks
ridging the blanket. No more jailbreaks
from pain, or nightmares—
enemies, terrors—or the good intentions
of friends. How
many dozens of us
had literally adored you? To this day
I hate it that you loved and needed anything
more than your crowded life,
and family in Monza, and me. Tonight
safe at home by a fireside
you'll never share,
from cold that won't again
smoke with your breath, I miss you
and am still angry.