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## Angels of Fire

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## *Frankie Paino*

### ANGELS OF FIRE

Out west, fire swallows an ever-widening circle  
of forest tonight, like a wish kissed on a coin  
and cast in a fountain will repeat itself, grow  
larger over water's silver surface. On TV,  
a reporter stands in the fluttery glow. It spills  
into our room, stains your pale skin infernal,  
lovely as any good sin, or the monarch butterflies  
one June which set the sky alight, the hushed applause  
of their delicate wings dusting our breath with gold.

It was the last summer we possessed the shapes of boys,  
which is no shape, really, and we'd run, shirtless,  
beneath acres of sheltering oak, sweat lacquering  
our chests as the sky slit its own throat and heat  
shimmered off asphalt, set our neighbourhood afloat.

Down the street, fire caught a classmate of ours  
so unaware that when she woke it was not in this world  
where her mattress steamed like an ancient altar and her  
silhouette, coiled around itself like a cat in a sunlit  
window, slept on its side even after her slight body  
was clothed in cool satin, strewn with blushed rose  
petals handed to us by black-mantled nuns as we filed  
past the alabaster casket which stood open like a music  
box whose tiny dancer had grown tired of the dance. You  
whispered your envy to me in the vaulted shadows  
of that church, how she had become like those eider-winged  
spirits who graced the stained glass windows or rose  
above the crèche's spare gable each winter~as if  
death transmutes without discretion, each one of us  
destined for the same eternity.

I remember how we walked to your angel's house  
three days after she died. The scent of smoke and water.

Silence like a shrine. I can still see the foyer  
going dim with evening, blackened ribs of lumber  
which once held the roof at its elegant pitch, ghost  
shadows seared against walls~clock, cabinet, crucifix~  
as if each object was only briefly absent and meant  
to take form again like the closed faces of night-blooming  
jasmine at noon. The gunmetal tang of an approaching  
storm drifted through shattered windows as we climbed  
the winding stairs, and when you smiled, turned  
towards me, failing sun caught in your hair like braids  
of beaten copper. Then you leaned against the balustrade  
which seemed to melt beneath your hands, spindles of ash  
crumbling as you faltered, then disappeared into grey  
atmosphere.

If I prayed, it was for the gift of wings. And if  
that prayer was answered, it was the same reply Icarus  
received. Then there was only the sound of a distant  
mower. No breath. No cry from you who lay perfectly still  
as that child in her grave. I cradled you the way water  
holds the quiet bodies of the drowned, each moment's passing  
like the sound of *goodbye*. When I pressed my mouth  
over yours it was the taste of the coming rain. Then  
lightning cut the sky like bright ribbons torn from  
unexpected packages and you gasped, lungs filling  
with charcoaled air.

Tonight, you said it must have been an angel who bore you  
out of the luminous throat which had swallowed you whole  
and back to this world where your body looked like a stranger  
held fast in my embrace. My Love, I don't believe in angels,  
unless they are only hungry ghosts of the reluctant dead  
haunted by memories of our sensible gifts. Angels of fire.  
Of storms. Angels transfixed by that long-ago sky flecked  
with impossible gold or the simple beauty of prised

candlelight caught in sweat which beads between the soft  
rise of your breasts, whose envy turned a blind eye as  
flames ate their way up those stairs now decades gone.  
Whose mercy flung out an unseen net to hold you dazed  
but unharmed, your breath dark as the underbellies  
of rain-laden clouds. The thrum of your heart like  
an ovation. Like thunder.

## THE BINDING OF ISAAC

Perhaps it was a voice like ten-thousand bowstrings  
drawn tight as a well-kept secret, a sound which rose

from a nimbus of flies that vexed the inarticulate  
tongue of a sacrificial dove. Or perhaps it was

the unanswering stillness when woven garlands,  
grain, gems, lay strewn in elaborate temples,

salvation's map withheld for want of a throat opened  
wide as a traitorous smile~whatever could possess

a father to take in one hand, fire, the other, a curved  
blade, bind his beautiful son ankle to wrist,

ankle to wrist, cuffs of blood circling bone like  
bands of gold as morning unbolted the crimson sky.

Then there was only the rough stone altar. No voice  
appeased by blind obedience. No swift and

muscular angel summoned to stay the gnarled hand.  
Just a young man curled around the shape of his breath,

his long brow, abrupt chin, familiar as the rasp  
of sand against yellowed teeth, the truth of what