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Milton on the Plains: The Coal Furnace

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SHARON CHMIELARZ

Milton on the Plains: The Coal Furnace

*"A Dungeon horrible, on all sides round
As one great Furnace flam'd, yet from those flames
No light, but rather darkness visible
Serv'd only to discovere sights of woe..."*

Ours burned, like Milton's, with unholy light.
My parents fed it in our basement's dusk,
two shadows banking darkness, Mom in gloves
and housedress, would heft a shovelful of lignite
to horrid lips and shove it in. Then clang!
The iron firing door slammed shut. Upstairs,
we walked the floorboards hearing smoldering coal:
Imagination's fuel. A dose of Poe
ignites the tale: a heart that's ripped in two,
a night of drunken fury, a man who feeds
his wife to fire, limb by bloodied limb.
And who would stop her husband's deeds of woe?
His children? Hell's walls hold in the screams.
No one can search its ashy pit for bones.
The devil's throbbing anthem rings, *Forever
together.*

I prayed for a deliverer,
someone to tame the furnace, convert it
to lighter gas or oil, a furnace fed
by tubes no man could shove a body through.