

Arson · *Carol J. Pierman*

I was too young to realize
the coincidence of fires. I knew only

my mad uncle played piano with a dead
man, or so he thought, grandiose concertos,

singing out the missing pair of hands.
When those two played, music filled the house

with an insistent, pumping clamor, until gradually
we ended up outside. No matter how cold,

we'd sit on the porch like the consumptives
of Saranac Lake, sheltering behind a wedge of newspaper,

ignoring how we looked to neighbors,
or the sounds—too loud—coming from inside the house.

This seemed to have nothing to do with
that other thing, or so I thought.

Seven fires in a dozen years: a carport,
kennel, some tool sheds, and then, four times,

the family business. I knew only how
that smell could be mistaken for a dream,

fire fanned by water, skimming blue across the ice
as if only flames could put out such heat.

And there went Grandpa's hardware again and again,
the step ladders and fanged tools dying like

the end of evolution, plaster peeling down to brick —
a black *mille feuilles* blowing, raining creosote

all over town, setting other, smaller fires.

Curse us. I'm sure they cursed us. The neighbors,

merchants, Volunteers, unable to care for our own.
After each fire it was the beginning of the end again,

and each time a new, more modern store
rose in that terrible cavity — pipefittings,

girders, then wheelbarrows, swingsets, saws —
a redundancy completely new and gleaming,

and just meant for burning. He had perfect pitch,
my uncle, an uncanny ear. At church he was the angel

at the organ, above us, back to the sanctuary,
playing to the busy picket of silver pipes.

Each Sunday he rushed us brilliantly along,
marching through hymns and anthems, eyes glittering

cold in the tilted mirror, commandeering the obvious
until we practically ran from it, down the stairs

and into the open and soundless light,
away from another good morning's Benediction.