

Two Poems · *William Olsen*

FIREWORKS

My neighbor follows his phone cord
out across his porch to the plush voice of his easy chair.
Downstreet, barechested athletes aim skyrockets into a sugar maple
and are desolate voices again.
Out on the street that buried the town fathers
some voice walking to work left his canvas glove
reaching out from the tarmac without a body to pull free.
Soon the firehazard voices of the bars will be
boarded up to keep the darkness in.
Like an extinct people, the emptiness of the streets
brought about one great going home,
the dead cars resurrected

in a roar of transcended place.
My neighbor with a mouthpiece to another world
is perishing in my thoughts and it doesn't even hurt.

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They're absolutely harmless this evening,
about as apocalyptic as a sparkler in a child's hand,
these exclamations of longing
that used to be water and light and a little dirt.
My neighbor to the north jabs a Roman Candle
into his lawn, and how like smoke he is.
His kids scream narcs and pushers and Martians and Zarconians,
stand shirtless as in a frieze under Vesuvius,
as if they had been born and bathed clean

and named inside a hospital of fire.
They stare at the flames waiting for something
meteoric like the beginning to begin,
for a burning door to appear.

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But here in this millennium my neighbor
whose voice spends its evenings uttering its citizen away,
out loud, so every interested party
can hear how many friends afloat in calamitous seas
grasp for dear life to the frayed rope of his advice

pulls up in a Vega, steps out from
his car of the first magnitude,
mounts his porch, cradles a ringing telephone
and stands there talking while he holds his ears—

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What good can our small talk do
all our neighbors homeless in their feelings
behind snapshot windows the street lines up,
the newlyweds two houses down who scream
pots and pans and dishes as long as
one last joy remains intact?
They must sound even stranger
when in the blue snow of a television
they mouth each other's
shipyards and estuaries,
collapse to the tame
wilderness of the bed.
Excuse my American lust
for endings, for
each stadium of earth

lost under a hoarse din of light
released by flames that never would be flames again.

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I drift downstreet and take in the fireworks,
sidewalks gray with squibs and the spindrift of Black Cat scraps,
each star the punk-lit tip of a fuse.
The skinniest shirtless kid in the universe runs across
the street to hug my leg, a balsa Cessna
with a broken propeller in his hand.
The simple cure for everything

is to blow it up and let each ash
that used to be part of an airplane
break into many ashes saying
forgive us for becoming less than fire.

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Here in the stalled heart of the country
the stores close down, in the antique shop window
the bridal gowns hold out their lace sleeves
to the stilettos of the willows.
Maybe seeing is a kind of copulation
from which issues
the nothingness of a night.
Maybe your eyes groped through
jail cells of fire,
and you could touch what you
saw and not destroy it thank
God or godlessness for that thank
the least leaves creeping out,

a strange gunpowder breath on your face,
embers like eyesight falling through the trees.

*

Each match flares up
its very own holocaust on this street,
illuminating kids who came from some place further
even than the dark houses where nothing has changed for years.
And any sulfurous alien who wants to
is free as a burning witch to look off at a sky
given over to the Everlasting Yea of Aerials,
to dandelion fusillades in the gloom,
ribcages unlocking incendiary hearts.
So light the Frightened Birds,

The Howlers, the Flowering Plums,
the Tanks with their blue clouds of death smoke.
All prior attempts at happiness have failed.
These are no scared children
half naked on the naked lawn of ashes
who walk armed into the vast oven of night.