

EMBERS AND FLAMES

EDITED
BY
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Maureen Tolman Flannery's "Making Do" was first published as "In Lieu of Directing Sunlight" in *Destiny Whispers to the Beloved*, John Gordon Burke Publishers, 2009.

Jason Kapcala's "Lake House" first saw publication in *Long Story*, *Short*, July, 2014

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George Samerjan's "Ground Fire" first appeared in *Home Without a Flag*, North Chatham Co., Ltd., 2014.

Ingrid Swanberg's "Ariadne's Confession" was first published in *Osiris* #70, June 2010; subsequently in *Awake* by Ingrid Swanberg, Green Panda Press, 2014.

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TO THOSE WHO WRITE WORDS FORGED IN FIRE

BOOK DESIGN & PRODUCTION

BY

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SMOKE RAPTURE
MARY HOTLEN

The restaurant is white linen, candlelight and old jazz.
Long windows reflect the season's ice in pearl dusk.
Waiters discreet as dignitaries, island privilege left behind.
Cognac and strawberries in warm cream.

My eyes hold his as they have over eons.
Our old sweetness, its lust and loss a green ache.
Names are inconsequential, too small to contain us or describe events,
Smoke rapture burns our throats. Seconds pass like pieces of deepest blue.

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His wife knows me, brushes past the light in my face.
Acrid air, alarming as hearts beating.
My husband stands to scan the room but sees only happy couples,
heads bent together in flame.
I will him to be confused, uncertain, fastening on no one.

I have mortgaged my children, given away all that I own.
For a necessary moment: ecstasy nestled in velvet.
Living beside, before and again; a sequence blurred with rapture.
Ever, incendiary.

HOME OF MEMORIES, HOUSE OF ASHES
JULIE A. JACOB

MY FATHER HAD DIED and now his house was dying.
He passed away in the dining room, where we had placed the hospital bed so he could smell the chili simmering on the stove in the kitchen, hear his daughters and his grandchildren murmuring in the living room, and feel the warmth of the autumn sun streaming through the dining room window. He died in the house he had lived in for 48 years. He died wearing pajamas the same shade of blue as his eyes, eyes now blinded by the tumor that was twisting its tentacles deep into his brain. He died as my sister and I had held his hand and told him that we loved him.

"Home," he said over and over in the emergency room, the ICU, and, then, finally, in the hospice, until he could no longer speak. That and "I love you."

He wanted to go home to die, and so we brought him home. It wasn't easy; an astonishing amount of paperwork was required to transport a dying man twenty-five miles to his home. When the ambulance drivers arrived, they stared at him for a moment, shaking their heads, as though they doubted he would make it home alive.

But he did, and he lived the last thirty-six hours of his life in his own home. He died on October 29, 2012, and soon after, his house began to die, too.

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When I was six months old, my parents bought a white clapboard ranch house with black shutters and red brick trim. It had three bedrooms, a large kitchen, a sunny dining room, and a living room with a fireplace. My sister and I loved that fireplace; we would sit on the stone ledge, toasting marshmallows on skewers over the embers. On winter nights we'd lay on the floor with our feet propped on the ledge to warm our toes. Sometimes we would turn on the spotlight above the fireplace, hop on the cement ledge, and perform shows for our parents. My mother liked to sit in the

chair by the fireplace and read. That was her spot. On snowy nights, she would ask, "Should we put in a log in the fireplace?" My sister and I would stuff newspapers beneath the grate, while my father brought in logs from the stack on the porch. He'd strike a long wooden match and soon I'd hear the soothing crackle and smell the comforting scent of burning pine or oak.

Our house was built in a new subdivision at the edge of the city. The sidewalks were smooth and white. Spindly saplings lined the curb and swing sets jutted up like construction cranes in the big square yards. The little white house was supposed to be my parents' starter home, the one they would eventually sell so they could move to a more spacious home on a quiet street. My mother dreamed of living on a street with a poetic name and a kitchen with a window over the sink so she could watch the birds flutter around a feeder while she rinsed the dishes. My father yearned for an attached garage so he wouldn't have to scrape ice off his car on dark winter mornings. In the meantime, while my parents waited and saved for the right time to move, my mother planted purple clematis and a rose bush in the back yard. She wallpapered the kitchen and bedrooms and then papered them again. My father built a screened-in porch and remodeled the basement into a charming reproduction of an English pub. Because he loved my mother, my father added touches to make the house as comfortable as possible: a cedar closet, extra cabinets, more shelves.

Because the neighborhood schools were excellent, my parents did not wish to uproot my sister and me, and by the time my sister and I were out of school, it seemed pointless to move to a bigger home. So they stayed and grew old in the little white house, and their grandchildren played in the same basement family room where my sister and I had once played. My parents repainted the walls and replaced the carpeting, good-naturedly grumbled about the small bedrooms and noisy street and remarked wistfully about the bigger home in a nicer neighborhood that they should have bought, but didn't.

My sister and I grew up and left home. She married and settled down across town from my parents, but I did not plant roots. In fifteen years, I lived in four apartments and one condo in three states. I had many places of residence, but my parents' house was Home.

Then my mother passed away from a heart attack, abruptly, unbelievably, and too young. Heart weighted with grief, I sold my condo in Chicago and bought a small brick house in my hometown so I could be near my father and sister. The house had not been loved like my parents' house. The carpet was stained and the wallpaper faded. No fireplace. But it was on a pretty street two blocks from Lake Michigan, and, beneath the grime, I could imagine polished hardwood floors, a sunny kitchen with lemon-colored walls, and red geraniums blooming in a pot on the front stoop.

Fixing it up became our family project during a year of sorrow. My brother-in-law replaced the windows and re-sanded the oak floors. My sister and I peeled off the ugly wallpaper and painted the kitchen and bathroom. My father installed new lights and added closet shelves.

In the evenings, I walked my little poodle on a quiet street on a bluff overlooking the lake. I could see the lighthouse to the north and the beach to the south. Red-winged blackbirds darted among the trees. At night, when I lay in bed, I could hear the foghorn; the slow bass sound lulled me to sleep. Slowly, the house became my home, but, still, not quite Home. Home was where my father lived.

Although my father spent hours helping me fix up my house, he did not touch his own home. My mother had enjoyed redecorating, but my father didn't want anything changed after she died. He wanted the house to remain the same, right down to the blue and white china rabbit placed in the center of the kitchen table, and thus my mother's beautiful home became an elderly person's house. As a child, I had wondered why the houses of old people seemed musty and still, like a broken clock in the attic. Now I knew why. They were houses trapped in time.

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We tell those who are grieving that the places and objects dear to the missing beloved are unimportant. "A person lives in your heart," we say. "It's the memories that are important. " Yet instinctively we know that the places and objects touched by those we loved and still love are meaningful. A father's watch, a mother's ring—or our parents' house—those things are sacrosanct, and we cherish them, fight over them, and cling to them.

After my mother died, my sister and I assumed the care of the little white house. We dusted and vacuumed and scrubbed, but

without my mother's presence. Furniture no longer shone nor smelled perpetually of lemon furniture polish. Pill bottles and medical bills cluttered the kitchen countertops. My mother's once beautiful yard no longer bloomed with a riot of roses and geraniums. Still, despite the evidence of my mother's absence, I felt closer to her in the house than anywhere else. This was the place where she had laughed and read and planted flowers. My father and I often watched movies together in the evenings. He sat in his oversized armchair, and I perched on the couch. Neither one of us, though, sat in my mother's chair by the fireplace or ever asked "should we put a log in the fireplace?" The empty chair and the unlit fires were the placeholders for our grief.

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For the first few weeks after my father died, I tried to pretend that he was merely in the hospital for a lengthy stay. My sister and I picked up his mail and raked the leaves. In the bathroom I could still faintly smell his favorite aftershave. His jacket hung over the kitchen chair. Sometime I'd go over there, make a pot of coffee and simply sit in the kitchen, soaking in the sunshine that streamed through the window, and thinking of my parents.

Then it became harder to pretend. We cleared out the refrigerator and packed the dishes in cardboard boxes. We turned down the thermostat. We removed pictures that had hung on the walls for 40 years and hauled away furniture. The house became as still and cold as the ashes in the fireplace. When I would go over to the house to check on it, I'd perch on the edge of the fireplace ledge and gaze at the empty living room, thinking of the family and conversation that had once filled it.

And yet, there were still times when we almost forgot he was gone. We stopped at the house regularly to cut the grass and turn lights on and off. "I cut the grass at Dad's house today," one of us would say. Anyone overhearing the conversation would assume that our father was alive and lived in the house.

One evening in early fall, nearly a year after he had died, I drove to the house to pick up the mail. It was a chilly and damp evening, like so many evenings when I had gone to my father's house to have dinner with him or watch a movie. The lamppost was turned on. Lights on automatic timers had switched on, and the windows glowed with amber light on this rainy night. As I opened

the door, I swear, that for a moment I forgot that he was gone and expected to hear his voice saying, "Hello!" For a second I believed he was alive. Then I stepped inside and the house was chilled and silent.

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We needed to do something with house—rent it, sell it, or buy it—and soon. My father, burdened with medical bills, had needed to remortgage the house, and the bank was impatient. Once I had told my father that I wanted to buy his house someday.

"Why?" my father had said. "You're in a prettier neighborhood."

"But it's a nicer house."

"But yours is brick," he said.

"Yours is bigger."

He was insistent. "No, it's not."

And so it went.

I wanted that house, oh, how I wanted my Home. I was so close to buying it. Then I was laid off from my job, and when I was employed again, the lender was picky and the broker asked for documents and more documents and yet more, and then he needed them all again.

Finally, I gave up, exhausted, beaten down by the regulations and paperwork. I couldn't do what I had dreamed of doing: tear off the wallpaper, pull up the carpeting, save my Home, and remodel it to blend the best of the old and new.

So the house went up for sale, and when I saw that "for sale" sign posted in front of my father's house like a tombstone, I thought about three articles I had read recently in the local newspaper about family homes—one whimsical, one tragic, and one happy. The first story was a warmhearted feature about a man in his fifties who had spent every single Christmas of his life — every one — sleeping in his childhood bedroom in his parents' house. Even after he had married, had children, and moved out of town, he and his family came back every Christmas Eve to spend the holiday with his parents. The article didn't say what his wife thought about this.

The second story, which merited an article on the front page of the newspaper, was tragic. Another middle-aged man, this one unmarried and childless, had spent his entire adult life caring for his elderly mother and disabled sister. After the two women died, the family home fell into foreclosure. The night before the sheriff was scheduled to come to change the locks, the man set the house on

fire around him and died in the only home he had ever known. The house was located on the same street as a home where I had been invited for Thanksgiving dinner. The fire had occurred a few weeks earlier. The house was a blackened shell roped off with yellow police tape. It stank of smoke, a pungent smell of sorrow and loss.

The third story was a happy one. Adult siblings had inherited their parents' house in the north woods of Wisconsin. Instead of selling it, they decided to keep it just as was and celebrate the holidays there. It was their own personal holiday inn.

And that, I realized, is what I truly wanted. I didn't want to live in my parents' house all the time. I wanted my parents' house to remain unchanged and continue to be my North Star, a place I visited, but didn't reside at, a Home always welcoming, steady and assuring as my parents' love, patiently waiting for me as I came and went. But my parents had died, the house had died, and now my dream of Home had died, too.

“Home” was one of the last words my father said. He wanted to go home to die and he did. And when I am old woman, perhaps in a little apartment or a nursing home, what home is it that I will dream of at night, which memories of home will burn in my heart, and where will I long to return? A little white house with red brick trim, a sunny kitchen and a living room with a fireplace on a noisy street? A small brick house with hardwood floors two blocks from the lake where I heard the foghorns at night? Or, perhaps, someplace yet unseen and unlived and unknown, my own undiscovered Home?