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The Three of Us

*for me, Jeanette and Joan*

In my mother's house  
Nightmare carried candles,  
tucked the quiet children into bed.  
Our blankets smoldered with her flickering anger—  
We crept through shadowy hallways,  
pitched headlong down narrow cavern stairs.

In the lighted kitchen below,  
noisy dreams roistered at the table,  
passed fistfuls of cards, played Pinochle, made wagers,  
joked in indecipherable tongues,  
shrieking with brassy laughter.

In ragged day, the corners of each room  
sharpen with guilt and obligation.  
Closets hold darkness, clothes that do not fit,  
rows of old scuffed shoes.  
One must go forth and do  
things that will make the mother proud.

From our common bedroom,  
my sisters' voices call, reedy as wood flutes,  
monotonous four-note soliloquy—  
my name repeated, sung in sorrow's cursive.  
Behind me, Nightmare strikes her match.

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## Victims

I seldom buy the newspaper any more—  
Mostly half pages grayscale ads,  
politics, sports, then photos of murder victims:  
abused two-year-olds, young women. And the way

you shake open the folded paper, saying,  
"What a shame. She was so pretty,  
and I say, "Oh, and if she had been ugly,  
would it *not* be a shame?" enraged,

aiming hatred at you like a gun,  
because I am not so pretty—perhaps  
the perfect victim, the photo your eyes  
would slide on past, uncaring,

to stare at the thumbnail shot of a blonde  
who led the loudest high school cheers  
and whose shout-outs on a city street  
had this time gone unanswered.

## Origin of the Fire

1. *Lucifer*: a proud, rebellious archangel,  
identified with Satan, who fell from heaven.
2. (lowercase) *friction match*. (*dictionary.com*)

Nomads in houses, we moved state to state  
following father's work. We begged a space

from relatives and carried parts of home  
along with us like snails. Once for a time

we lived with my granduncle in his house  
on a small-town main street. He seldom smiled.

His house was dark. His wife was dead. He had  
no pets or children. In blurred memory

I see the narrow shadowed stairs, the slippery  
threadbare carpet. Near the cobwebbed wall,

wood chest with horse decals, the thick red paint  
charred on one corner. *Who had set the fire?*  
I had begged for the stickers, patted them  
in ragged lines along the sides and lid:

wild ponies in pesade, their rippling manes  
scorched in a dark incendiary wind.

Inside the chest, a melted rubber doll,  
size of a baby, plastic eyes rolled back.

My father smoked. My mother burned with rage.  
No child was wanted. I do not recall

running outside for refuge from the flames,  
wondering how the room became alight.

Once a man led a pony, door to door,  
offered to take my photograph, disguised

with borrowed vest and Stetson. I can't find  
that picture--Mother must have told him no.

Mornings I woke, obedient to her call,  
came to the landing and stood frozen there,

knowing I'd fall, thinking, *I'm going to fall*  
and every day, I fell like Lucifer.

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AHF Poetry Award*

*Sur le Pont D'Avignon*

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I dreamed that dreams spoke in their own language,  
reading from a script, letters in the shape of fleurs de lis.

I was driving west on Philadelphia Street. It was gothically dark, wind blowing, rain pelting down. A Black woman in a dress and heels was on the sidewalk going west past the courthouse parking garage. Her well-dressed little boy was darting back and forth around her ankles. I stopped and rolled down my window. It didn't seem as if I had to worry about cars behind me. I shouted, "Do you want an umbrella?" I pulled the umbrella up from the floor and held it out the window to slip off its cover and open it. Her husband came running across the street from the direction of Ruby's Glass building, shouting, "We sure do!" The umbrella opened out and out and out. There was enough to shelter all of them.

I dreamed there was a parchment hand-drawn map,  
a dark blue compass in the lower corner.

I was with a small group of young people walking on an embankment along a railroad track. A teenage boy was near me, in some sort of jeopardy. There was also a dark-haired woman in a white shirt tied up within a wooden barrow framework near the tracks. Although the dream said she was in danger of being attacked and killed, she did not seem to want to be released. I left her there.

I dreamed there was a grey corner wall and beyond it  
a wooden colonial blue Dutch door, the top half open.

The path was soft sticky mud and led to an antique red brick turret. Water dripped from the shingled cornice over an oak entrance with brass locks. Men in gray tweed greatcoats stood on their shadows beside a mud path. In leather gloved hands, one of them held a black umbrella; another gripped a large brass skeleton key shaped like a fleur de lis.

I woke with a song playing in my head.  
I think I woke. I think once, long ago, I knew the song.