

Claire Millikin

The Foxes

Gradually, door by door, she opened the house
to the pasture that ran to fields beyond.
The unlocked doors swayed like adolescent girls
on their new long legs, unpracticed.
Horses grazed by thresholds, and feral dogs
haunted the edges, coming in from pinewoods.
Into her house came the animals uncalled—
smelling her need, her tenderness,
the sweet hollow of her hands
cupped and deciduous, cradling
like a mother—in her touch that knowledge
of what's lost when you truly cannot speak of it.

A family of foxes soon made their den
in her defunct fireplace. She'd burn
no more fires, but the hearth flickered
with red-gold fur as the fox mother curled
to nurse her infants. I remember their eyes
like embers, bright and wet, the part of the fire
that can survive water, stronger than ash. They'd watch
us children come into her house and gradually let
my hand reach nearer, further, further
into the hearth at last to stroke without breathing
that fur like silken earth, the finest dirt made vivid,
Georgia's red clay tempered, a flame the hand could bear.

What burned in that house? Her husband gone,
and daughter long since dead—echoed
shots from the field where he'd caught
the girl in the crosshairs, maybe by accident.
The foxes flourished, cried for no one,
svelte shoulders liling. They shouldered
what none human could, making home
in the hearth of Demeter while Demeter
drank gin straight and smoked another,
her still beautiful, toothless face tilting up,
catching the light reflecting
from the fireplace—a darkness brilliant—
visitant sheen and flash of fox.