

## Disturbed Nights

For the second time these last twelve months a neighbour has summoned an ambulance on a dark, humid night. At first I've thought the distant siren as usual of some emergency across the valley and imagined an accident in which a man driving home late from a bar has crossed the grassy median and plunged into an oncoming truck,

or young boys in a Jeep, beer cans in hand and shouting along with thumping rock music, have lost control at an unexpectedly sharp bend in the road, for these are the morning-paper headlines telling of a night's disasters as one pours skimmed milk in a measured portion of granola and reads of unnecessary deaths;

but then the neighbourhood dogs begin to howl as if the siren, very loud now, stabbed their ears, and I run out and see the elm tree lit up by approaching headlights and then the whole front yard illuminated. For a second the white light dazzles, then alternate red and blue flashes make me fling a hand across my eyes.

The ambulance is slowing down approaching my house. The first time it came I stood behind a photinia hedge I'd trimmed and fertilized in the spring to make it grow protectively thick and watched the paramedics walk up to the neighbour's front door like late dinner guests. They remained inside a long time and I waited in my garden,

the continuously flashing beams of the ambulance making the front of my house a stage where electricians tested a lighting effect before a performance. A paramedic returned to the ambulance and wheeled a stretcher to the house just as I'd once seen in the same driveway the UPS man wheel a large package to the door.

But this second time I watch two paramedics go inside the next neighbour's house, return to the ambulance and then back to the house, repeatedly, thrice. They walk with heads bowed like I've seen county tax appraisers do, walking out of their white utility van parked in the street, going to a house to settle a question of value.

They haven't yet come out for the stretcher. I should go in. The ambulance is parked right across from my drive and the flashing red and blue beams hurt my eyes; but I stay outside, taking up a stand behind the photinia hedge, and wait to see if the paramedics when next they come out will not just drive away, but it's a long, tense wait.

ZULFIKAR GHOSE