

## Joseph Millar

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### *The Sacred Altar of Poetry*

I like the night above the valley  
where the snow would pile up in winter  
and you could hear the crossing bells  
of the long trains heading west.  
I like the wee small hours of the morning  
as Frank Sinatra would say  
before the dawn slowly opens  
into the silence of day.

Silence, the wellspring of happiness  
which I won't raise my voice against,  
my voice like a small twin-engine plane  
lost in a cloud with no instruments.  
At twilight I walk through the streets of town  
through the wildfire smoke that kills all the smells,  
horchata and masa and guacamole,  
when I looked through the windows of tarnished glass  
trying to buy headache pills.  
Each night after supper I take out the trash  
instead of making a song or an ode—  
I wash the dishes, wipe down the stove:  
if the muse were a whore, I'd give her the cash.

## *Wildfire Season*

She wants you to follow the tracks  
to the sea  
and stop thinking about tomorrow,  
the tracks of the ravens, herons and crows  
that scar up the landscape  
and keep pressing down,  
and though you don't wish  
to go through this again  
she wants you to rise up into the air  
with its smoke and particles falling like rain,  
ashes of trees and houses and cars,  
burned-up vineyards, burned-up guitars,  
even the ashes of someone's mother  
shaped like a little French wing,  
an aileron hovering above California  
where the trains roll south  
and the crossing bells ring,  
for these are the days to be patient  
and try not to want anything  
and these are the nights  
you can't see the stars,  
to drink extra water  
and climb the stairs slowly  
and practice your quietest breathing.

## *December 2020*

This year an old guy named Lewis  
has driven me to the market  
in his blue half-ton Ford  
which goes by the name of Anthony  
and has a hole in the floor  
and we've loaded up with a Christmas ham  
and spinach and twelve ruby-skin yams,  
pumpkin filling in an oversized can,  
cinnamon sticks from Vietnam  
and one copy of USA Today  
useless except for the crossword  
for today is the winter solstice,  
winter to half the earth,  
shortest day, longest night  
here in the quiet north  
under the moon and Venus above,  
Saturn conjunct with Jupiter  
where no one needs to anxiously hope  
or endlessly seek for love  
though we can write down a solstice wish  
and throw it into the fire  
and peel an orange in the darkness.

## *Shine Through*

The fire burns down against the rocks  
turning the ashes white  
and the petals of the Christmas flower  
open their points out  
like a new star  
which the world is making  
every moment,  
making new stars day and night.  
In the pale grass  
and brown straw fallen  
under the cypress and pines,  
new stars being made  
so common and rare  
burning away in the desert air  
where sometimes the wind  
makes a sound like a flute  
and only the wild things usually set foot.  
They shine on the ice fields in the far north  
and all through heaven and earth.  
There are piles of dark kelp  
washed up in the sand  
washed in the fullness of time  
and the moon's a bright crescent  
just past new  
hanging above the waves  
which are making new stars  
in their spindrift and whitecaps  
and making new stars in their depth,  
new stars in the abysses and canyons  
shining on life and death.