

The Fire that Would Not Go Out

There was once a man with a fire in his chest.
Not heartburn, and not grief — though it resembled both.
Not desire, though it stirred when he looked upon beauty.
Not fear, though it often kept him awake at night.

The village healers gave him teas and tinctures.
The physicians tapped, poked, and sighed.
The monks offered silence.
The mystics offered riddles.

Still, the fire remained.

He tried falling in love.
He tried making music.
He tried making money.
He tried to extinguish it in every way he knew.

But the fire would not go out.

At last, an old washerwoman caught him staring into the stream where she scrubbed.
“You’re not the first,” she said, wringing out a shirt.
“First what?” he asked.

“To carry a holy fire,” she said, nodding toward his chest.
“It’s not meant to burn you up, you know.
It’s meant to keep you *seeking*.”

She handed him the shirt, still warm from her hands.
“Try tending it, instead of fleeing it.”

He left the village soon after, with only a satchel and his strange fire.
He walked for years — through storm and starlight —
not to quench the flame,
but to learn what it was lighting.

And wherever he went,
the lost, the longing, and the weary
would draw near to his warmth.

— William Zeitler
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