

ASHES FROM A LONG DEAD FIRE

*A HISTORY IN POETRY & PROSE IN COMMEMORATION OF THE
50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE COLLINS BLOCK FIRE IN
SYRACUSE, NEW YORK*



KATHLEEN BRYCE NILES

PULITZER PRIZE NOMINEE

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FEBRUARY 3, 1939 – FEBRUARY 3, 1989

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PREFACE

Assume that it is February 3, 1989, 0930 hours and we stand in Firefighters' Park. Fifty years have passed since the Collins Block Fire and subsequent tragedy. I have experienced but forty-eight of those years. One quarter of a century of my own career as a firefighter will be celebrated in just nine days.

My personal knowledge of this heart-rending community loss comes from stories related by my beloved Grandmother Liz, my father and mother, William and Erma, and my fellow Deputy Chief and big brother, Bill. These recollections and the news clippings and media coverage of the time are my only source of actual knowledge of the event.

For most of the February 3rds that I can recall, my family and I, and my brother firefighters have stood before the Firefighters' Memorial and thought "what a great loss for a community to suffer, nine of its bravest and most dedicated souls lost battling a senseless, unfeeling enemy called "fire."

The firefighters killed in the Collins Block tragedy hold a special place in the history of the City of Syracuse. The poems composed by Kathleen Bryce Niles, with great talent and feeling, seem to me a fitting testament to the love the community has for its public safety forces.

Many thanks to Kathleen for her moving collection of poetry and prose, and to the others who helped make this tribute a reality.

**Henry Francis Boynton
Deputy Chief
Syracuse Fire Department**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PEGGY SPERBER FLANDERS and JENNIFER B. MACPHERSON for their excellent criticism and constant support...and my other colleagues and friends in the **COMSTOCK WRITERS' GROUP**, publishers of **POETPOURRI**, for their suggestions and encouragement...**MICHAEL L.C. MORGAN, YVONNE CLIFTON, JOAN BROWN AND JOHN CONRAD.**

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ROSEMARY DUGAN for her encouragement and for the example that she has given by living a life of which her father would have been proud.

The **ONONDAGA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION** and the late **Mr. & Mrs. RICHARD WRIGHT and VI HOSKINS** whose efforts to document the history of Syracuse and its environs preserved much of the material available to researchers on the Collins Block fire.

DR. CYNTHIA A. CROSBY-MYERS, historian, for placing the fire in its historical context.

LT. DAVID REEVES for the illustrations that accompanied the initial printing of the book.

DEDICATION

FOR THOSE FIREFIGHTERS WHO LOST THEIR LIVES AS A RESULT OF THE COLLINS BLOCK FIRE

First Assistant Fire Chief CHARLES A. BOYNTON	July 20, 1876-Feb. 6, 1939
Acting Fire District Chief THOMAS J. DUGAN	May 13, 1889-Feb. 3, 1939
LT. RAY E. BAUDER	Aug. 20, 1900-Feb. 1939
LT. ALBERT G. YOUNG	June 1, 1891-Feb. 3, 1939
LT. DAVID LAVINE	Feb. 25, 1894-Feb.3, 1939
Fireman JOHN W. AGAN	Apr. 16, 1895-Feb. 3, 1939
Fireman JAMES E. DIAMOND	Jan. 11, 1904-Feb. 3, 1939
Fireman GREGORY M. DIXON	Jan. 1, 1897-Feb. 3, 1939
Fireman FRANK J. KERLIN	Feb. 28, 1897-Feb.3, 1939

**And for all the men and women of the Syracuse Fire
Department, Syracuse, New York, U.S.A.**

Proceeds from the initial printing were contributed to the Firefighters' Union
for the use of the firefighters and their families.

NOTES

Except for the fact that I am a City employee, my life is quite removed from that of a firefighter. Additionally, fifty years have passed since the Collins Block fire. Thus, I am astounded by the number of connections that seemed to somehow be a bridge between a tragedy that happened several years before I was born and my writing this brief memorial.

On Merrell Road, at the far west edge of Syracuse, where I grew up, there lived an abundance of firefighters. Fire Marshall JOHN M. DACEY lived right next door. As an Acting Lieutenant in charge of Engine Company No. 6, Mr. Dacey (as I knew him) was at the scene of the fire.

Next to Fire Marshall Dacey lived HERMAN J. FRITZEN who became a postman but whose name appeared on the list of possible candidates to fill positions left vacant after the Collins Block fire. Herm's son, and one of my childhood playmates, the Rev. JAMES C. FRITZEN, was for years the Chaplain for the Fire Department.

Next door to the Fritzens lived District Fire Chief FRANK CASTLEMAN who spent a lifetime working his way up through the ranks of the Department.

Next door to Chief Castleman lived Fireman MICHAEL LUDWIG who lost his life at a fire scene. Mike's name is inscribed on the monument in Fayette Park that was built for the men who lost their lives in the Collins Block fire and for those firefighters who have subsequently died in the line of duty.

And across from the Fritzen house lived Fireman JACK ABBOTT who served the SFD for a number of years as a firefighter.

Another neighbor, a police officer, was BOB CLAPPER. His father, Fire Chief CHESTER CLAPPER, was called away from inside the Collins Block building ten minutes before its collapse. As a child on the block, it seemed perfectly normal to me to have firemen living in almost every house on the street.

DICK STEFANKO, a co-worker and friend, realized during a conversation with me that it was his uncle, JOHN STEFANKO, who had called in the alarm on the fire. My mother remembered that her brother, C. EDGAR DODGE, had worried my grandmother sick by staying at the disaster site for three days as a rescue worker. And my elementary teacher, ROSEMARY DUGAN, whose work made a lasting impression on me and thousands of other children in the Syracuse City School District, lost her father, Acting District Chief THOMAS J. DUGAN, in the Collins Block fire.

Any poet would like to believe that only Destiny could make it imperative to write such a volume just prior to a 50th Anniversary. If this is so, then it is my fervent hope that Destiny had the good judgment to make this tribute worthy of those for whom it is written. K.B.N.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

You can expect cold, damp and snowy winters in Syracuse. Several times in a season "lake effect" snow, from Lake Ontario, will cover the central New York region with sometimes a foot of snow. The natives will tell you it happens too often and it creates impossible road conditions.

Four days before the Collins Block Fire raged in downtown Syracuse, the area was blanketed by a seventeen-inch snowfall. The next day, the sun warmed up the ground, melted some of the drifts and by Thursday, county roads were in good condition.

While the community was digging out of the snow, the news from the European continent was nearly as dismal. Neville Chamberlain was pressing the dictators Hitler and Mussolini to produce "concrete evidence" of their desire for peace. President Franklin Roosevelt revealed that the U.S. was "selling military airplanes to France" in order to help the democratic nations of the world. The Spanish Civil War seemed to be ending as Generalissimo Franco conquered Barcelona and a whipped Catalonian army fled to France. The financial market, however, was in an upward swing in contrast to the discouraging European news.

To escape the depressing international news and certainly the weather, Syracusans had an array of activities available the first of February. The Shrine Circus was in town and the Ice Follies of 1939 had begun a five-day engagement at the State Fair Coliseum. Next week, the Ina Ray Hutton orchestra and the Jimmie Lunsford band were headliners. On Tuesday, Syracuse audiences, had enjoyed a Syracuse Symphony performance at Lincoln Auditorium of Sibelius' Symphony No. 2 in D Major. At the Paramount, the movie JESSE JAMES was showing with stars Tyrone Power, Henry Fonda and Randolph Scott. At Loew's Theatre, Norma Shearer and Clark Gable were starring in IDIOT'S DELIGHT, a story placed in a mythical country with its characters speaking Esperanto, perhaps so as not to miff European dictators. A February furniture sale had begun at Dey's; at Sears, a Kenmore washer was retailing at \$49.95, and, at Learbury's, an overcoat was for sale at \$15. A new '39 Oldsmobile sedan was available at Spector Motors for \$838 and over at the Mohican market, a loaf of bread was 8 cents, butter was 29 cents, and two pounds of hamburger was only 33 cents. The Syracuse Orangemen basketball team was on the road that week defeating Manhattan 42 to 31 at Madison Square Garden.

The news with which Syracusans were awakened on Friday, February 3 was grim. Overnight, a major tragedy had struck the community.

The Post Standard's headlines would stop hearts and fill eyes: "*Eight Firemen Buried in Fire Ruins....*" Smoke had been discovered in the stairway of the Collins Block at 223-27 East Genesee Street and at 1:59 a.m. the first alarm was sounded. Flames broke through the roof of the five story brick building and scores of fire companies responded to the 3-3 alarm. Like thick fog, smoke poured from every window, from every sidewalk grating. It was so dense that fire officials were unable to locate the seat of the blaze before it spread throughout the building. As water poured into the building from all sides, the spray turned to ice. Tirelessly, firemen worked and by 3:45 AM the fire was under control.

Fifteen minutes later, disaster struck. A creaking noise sent some warning to the firemen in the building as the rear section of the roof collapsed. Dropping like an elevator, tons of roof, snow, water, pipes, brick and plaster fell to the cellar, carrying two firemen from the 3rd floor, three from the 2nd floor and one from the first floor. The firemen on ladders scrambled down and the men in the building tried to flee.

Like the ice frozen on the hoses, fear coated the faces of firemen who stood outside the building. Were all the firemen out safely? At first, it was though only three men were trapped, then they knew there were nine in the cellar. Immediately rescue efforts began, and just as soon rescuers were threatened with being trapped themselves. Rescuers hoped the missing men could see the floodlights focused on the rubble and could hear their voices as they dug past the bricks and timbers. The basement walls were reinforced and large suction pumps drew out the murky water.

Among the rescuers were several priests who donned firemen's gear, descended into the cellar to the wall separating the trapped men. There, they granted them absolution. As firemen shouted to their comrades one victim responded. It was William Moore who answered John Frost of Engine Co. 12. Cutting through the brick wall with his ax, Frost pulled Moore to safety, and after Rev. Robert Donovan of St. John Evangelist anointed him, Moore was sent to St. Joseph's hospital. Could they find more men?

Unfortunately, hope for the trapped firemen faded when, at daybreak, the remaining back walls crumbled and fell, adding even more weight to that which had dropped three hours earlier. Besides the tons of debris, there was over seven feet of water. The rescuers could only hope that their colleagues were not drowning. It was an agonizing thought which was dispelled two days later when it was revealed that the victims had not drowned at all, but had been asphyxiated or died instantly from crushing blows to the head and

chest. Until the bodies of the eight men were recovered on Saturday and Sunday, the massive rescue operation continued.

Steam shovels and huge cranes worked continuously to pull off the timbers, and trucks hauled away the blackened rubble. When the machinery was pulled out of service on Saturday afternoon so workers could buttress the walls of the adjacent Flaherty building, rescue workers resorted to a bucket brigade to remove the pieces of wreckage. There were scores of D.P.W., W.P.A., and C.C.C. workers called into service who worked tirelessly with firemen and other volunteers at the fire scene. Governor Lehman even released some state troopers to assist local police in traffic and crowd control. The fire disaster drew spectators by the hundreds. They were the concerned and the curious and they pushed, shoved, looted and generally interfered with local businesses. They came early in the day to watch and stayed late, peering at the toppled building flooded with lights, surrounded by noisy machinery and exhausted firemen and rescue workers. At the adjacent Engine House, an emergency canteen had been set up, while in the upstairs dormitories the families of the victims kept a vigil. The dreaded news came Saturday afternoon.

The first of the firefighters to be found was Lt. Albert Young of Engine Co. 2. A veteran of WWI, he had been with the department since 1916. He left a wife and daughter. Lt. Ray Bauder and Fireman Gregory Michael Dixon of Engine Co. 3 were found later on Saturday. Bauder was 39 when he died, leaving his wife, a son and daughter; Dixon had been with the Department since 1919 and intended to retire that year. He was survived by his wife. On Sunday, Firemen John Agan of Engine Co. 1, Frank Kerlin of the Hook and Ladder Co. 6 and James Diamond of Engine Co. 1 were uncovered. Agan had served in France during WWI, had been with the Department for 20 years and wanted to retire in 1939. Kerlin joined the Department in 1923 and would have been 41 later in February; and, Diamond, only 35, was a former Rosary school boy athlete who had been a fireman for twelve years. He left his wife and two children. Lt. David Lavine of Engine Co. 16 had joined the Department in 1916, made lieutenant in 1934. He was 45 when he died leaving his wife and three children. The oldest firefighter, Thomas Dugan, age 50, was recovered late Sunday; he was both Acting District Chief and Captain of Hook and Ladder Co. 1. Dugan was survived by his wife and two children. In all, there would be ten children left fatherless as a result of the Collins Block fire. For three days the search effort had continued. On Sunday night they turned off the floodlights, the rescuers left, and the darkened site was quiet.

Still another tragedy followed. The next day, First Assistant Chief Charles Boynton died at his home of a heart attack brought on by

strain and over-exertion at the fire scene. Boynton was one of the first to reach the fire and he took charge until Chief Gieselman arrived. He and Lt. Lavine were checking floor conditions when the building collapsed. Lavine fell and Boynton barely escaped. Chief Boynton had been with the Fire Department for forty years.

In the next several days, the community buried its heroes each in separate rites. The HERALD-JOURNAL had successfully raised over \$55,000 in a fund for the widows and children. Mayor Rolland Marvin suggested the erection of a memorial as a city-wide tribute and Fayette Park, also known as Firefighters Park was created in memory of the men lost in the Collins Block, the most disastrous fire in recent Syracuse history. For a few moments, usually on a cold and snowy February day, all the firefighters who have died are remembered: from the Bastable fire (1923), the Collins fire (1939), the University fire (1978). It is to all firefighters present and past that this volume of poetry is dedicated.

Cynthia A. Crosby, Ph.D.



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Like some monster of ancient origins, the fire persisted for three days, subsiding, raging and ultimately being conquered.

It was a carnivore:
Grendel,
rising out of ruptured slumber,
ravenous,
jaws, vice-clamped on brick & steel,
gnawing concrete,
washing down lives with oceans of water.

Mortally wounded,
axe-crunched and smothered,
whimpering,
it slunk off into the cold solace
of Mother-night,
there to lick the damp cool embers,
to choke to death under the
ashes from a long dead fire.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" is an age-old question that has been posed to myriad generations of children. In 1939, very few boys did not, at one time or another, answer that query with the response, "I want to be a fireman."

The glamour had long since gone.
Visions of spinning down
around grease-fast poles
were drowned in the adrenaline
of 3 AM bells.

Shiny helmets held together
pounding heads aching for air.
Flashy raincoats,
galvanized and slick,
dragged on arms that flicked
through the charred ruins
of ordinary histories.

Boots, black weighty barges,
abandoned in corners
like derelict ships,
were flotsam moored.

The fantasy of this life
was only for children and
the foolish.
Grown men never play with fire.

At the time of the Collins Block fire, the Mayor was vacationing in Florida. As soon as he was notified, he immediately returned to the city.

In February,
this city freezes flesh like mackerel,
clothes its bare-boned skeleton in snow.
This month there is no thaw,
no letting go of chill to warm us
from cruel winds.

I went south to the sun,
to sweat the frigid air from my body,
to swelter in hot days, warm nights.
I returned to the most bitter heat.
Fire.
Fire without purpose.
February will never be as cold again.

"The streams from the hoses played on the ruins for fifteen hours. With every minute, the smoke-grimed firemen who manned the streams from roofs and sidewalks knew as they worked that their friends might even then be drowning in the rising water." (Herald-Journal)

Streams of water
performed a surreal ballet:
dozens of fat ladies,
light on their feet,
tangoing with swarthy smoke
above the ruins,
ice-dancing over hot brick and iron.

Exhausted,
they drooped and swooned
at the ankles
of the huge structure,
filling its collapsed floors,
drowning hope beneath their awesome weight.

"Miss Mabel Holmes in charge of preparing the food for workers was headquartered at Engine Company 1...emergency canteen in the kitchen which backs up to the burning building. City employees circulated among the chilled rescuers with huge pots of steaming coffee...Later, Salvation Army Captains and lasses appeared with food and coffee..." (Herald-Journal)

Those would-be rescuers—
if they could be the heroes of their own lives—
cupped hot coffee between icicle-fingers,
praised steam rising from huge pots,
escaped the frigid fire
to the make-shift canteen.

And,
Miss Mabel Holmes,
soul afire to serve,
passed among them to warm flesh and feed spirits.
Sandwiches, fried cakes, coffee and
the soldiers of Salvation filled them
with a mission.

Renewed,
ablaze with hope,
they returned to the fiery landscape,
into the frozen night.

Probably the most pervasive emotion that swept over the city during the time of the rescue operations was fear. Fear that what the citizens already knew would be proven true...fear that such an unexpected tragedy could befall anyone, anytime...fear that so many things, for so many people would never again be the same.

Late winter cold forced Fear from sleep.
It prowled the streets, a wild thing,
lunging and pouncing on everyone it met
until all were gripped by deadly fangs
and shaken mercilessly.

Hundreds fought it honorably:
shadow-boxed an invisible nemesis,
slow-danced to violent rhythms,
depleted personal arsenals,
called out all reserves, and
used logic as a battering ram.

Still, try as all warriors do to survive it,
in the end, each was overrun and succumbed.
They suffered mortal blows,
were left with scars from a battle
no one won,
with wounds that covered over
but never healed.

Many fathers create futures for their sons and do their utmost to promote the kind of child they wished they could have been. In their zest to produce themselves all over again, they often lose sight of the importance of the individual child's sense of self.

“He was my son.
It was I,
like Polonius,
who taught him that
clothes make the man.
I bought him outfits:
 chaps and leather pants,
 helmets and epaulets,
 blue serge and holsters,
 pinstripes and spates.
I created him to bring
my fantasies to life.

My anger burned a hole in me.
The uniform was blue and bland,
nothing I brought home for him.
His pride was woven in the threads.
Each stitch bound me in despair.
How could he be a hero
in his own foolish fantasy
come to life outside of mine?”

All of life, some claim, is little more than metaphor. All feelings, good and bad, are merely the personification of myriad images...

Sadness,
like an old woolen shawl,
wrapped itself purposefully around their grief.
It pulled itself inside out,
brushed against the face of fear,
and unraveled agony,
thread by thread,
throughout the crowd.

In skeins of sorrow,
sleeves of mourning attached themselves
to weary bodies,
and in the end,
the searchers were knit,
one to another,
stitch by precious stitch.

In each other,
they found warmth.

"Fireman William E. 'Hiko' Moore had been lucky. The ninth one buried, he had been rescued almost immediately through a sidewalk grate." (Herald-Journal 6/20/71)

He held his head up, neck arched and aching,
to keep from drowning in water his buddies,
and he, himself, had poured into the shell.
There was no chance to run,
like a house of cards, it tumbled
down around them...Johnny Agan and Jimmy Diamond,
locked on the "pipe" hadn't even a
second to let go. "Hiko," five feet down the
hose, felt the blow, unknown enemy of brick
and timber, strike him down.
He called,
no answer.
So dark.
He couldn't see.
And weeks or perhaps only moments later
voices were heard. Shouts. Shouts back.
His voice, never again to be the same,
hollered at lung-pained volume.
Then, a pick...a thud against
brick-partitioned wall.
A hand gripped him, pulled him.
Up through a hole,
anointed by a priest,
alive,
he survived.

Whenever there is tragedy, there follows the natural human desire to replay the event in perpetuity. With every discussion and review, it is hoped that something will trigger a new angle, a new approach that will forever prevent such a recurrence. Rarely does life work so simply.

It was a calculated risk.
It always is. We could have watched it burn
but lives weren't all we tried to save.
City Hall was just across the way.
Wouldn't have looked right if it went down.
They had to go in.
Nobody thought about the fragile structure.
The adjacent Bastable Block burned
a couple of years before and left it weak.
Nobody expected the floor to give way.
It was a calculated risk.
If it all happened again tomorrow,
others would have to do it, too.

Although the entire city was devastated by the lives lost in the Collins Block fire, there must have been incredible shock and disbelief on the part of those women whose grown sons were killed.

"I never wanted him to be a hero.
I always knew pretty much what that word meant.
My father was a hero. Dead in the war.
My uncle was a hero. Saved a girl from drowning.
He was under too long to ever be the same again.
A friend of my mother's was a hero once.
Rescued an old woman from a burning building.
She was almost ninety.
And he, twenty-six,
was scarred for life.

I never wanted him to be a hero.
I wanted my son to grow bald,
gain some weight,
ache in all his joints,
grow a bit too old,
and die in his sleep
at the end of the world.

Years after the fire, Jimmy Diamond's wife told of that night when she ran to her neighbor after a rude reporter outpaced the clergy with news of her husband's death. She also revealed that the final paychecks arrived with deductions for the three days the firemen lay beneath the rubble. Although later rectified, the sting of that indiscretion was felt for decades...today such "errors" can be excused because of a computer.

And now, the banging at my door,
not quite enough to raise the dead,
awakens me.
She stands shaking on my stoop,
a wild vine overtaking a near-perfect garden.

Just moments ago, that reporter
yelled into her sleep-shrouded face,
"I want a picture of Jimmy Diamond,"
reality a frozen frame
her privacy a dinner for circling vultures.

Tomorrow,
Jimmy Diamond's photo,
stolen from his unprotected house
when she ran to me,
will be in the morning paper.

***"Silent rubber-coated firemen, lifted up the cold body tenderly,
and carried it to the waiting morgue wagon, which had gone to
the scene at the first report a body had been found." (Herald-
Journal)***

Like priests,
they lifted the body,
delicate ciborium,
shrine of a hero,
above the crowd with hands
sanded smooth from tossing ladders
like kindling
against the walls of a thousand blazes.

The icy street was
at once,
a cathedral,
where, in unison,
the silent witnesses
to the long night's vigil,
sang their sorrow in sighs
that caught the wind
and hissed regret through the open
wagon door.

Firemen Gregory Michael Dixon and Lt. Ray E. Bauder...“the forms were face downward and the arm of one was around the shoulders of the other, according to searchers. It appeared as if one had been helping the other when tons of debris crashed down upon them, burying them on the basement floor near the remains of Lt. Young.” (Herald-Journal)

“To those who say death is the most private and uniquely personal thing we do, not to be shared and not to be eased by another’s, we, who have died in tandem, colleagues and friends, must remind you that all of life may be summed in its leaving.

Our lives were not designed for heroes, for sacrifice nor honour.
We were two hard-workers, civil servants who could count on a week’s wage, a steady job with the city, and, should we live so long, a pension to carry us to workmen’s graves.

We did not die for ourselves, each other, or to save a life.
We died alone, together.
That was how we always worked.
It was the job.

***"Tight boots were credited with saving the life of fireman Leonard Schlacter of Engine Co. 1. Schlacter was on the 3rd floor with firemen who later were trapped in the ruins. Boots he was wearing were too tight so he decided to go around the corner to his headquarters for a larger pair. Seconds after he left the building, the whole interior collapsed."* (Post Standard)**

Toes,
jammed together like miniature firefighters,
jostling for space in cramped quarters.
Aching feet
squeezed out painful messages,
screeching sirens,
signals to leave the building
in search of other boots
in which to wage a comfortable
battle with the blaze.

And,
in his absence,
feet afire with blisters,
the floors collapsed where he had stood.
Pain climbed over itself
to pinch his entire body
and toes moved loose in boots
suddenly too big for comfort.

In order for the county and city work crews to move the heavy and huge machines requisite to the rescue work into the area, it was necessary for all trolley cars in the vicinity to be disconnected from their cables.

They were prisoners of war:
shot in action,
unable to escape.
Grounded by impotent cable,
their aerial spinal columns were cut
paralyzing them in their tracks.

The City Power Authority left them,
abandoned tanks at Grenoble,
exquisitely intense in defeat:
towers, parapets, cupolas and crows' nests.
Spectators, entrenched, became spies in them;
hanging out open windows to witness falling walls,
leaning against sturdy sides to escape raw winds,
hoisting themselves aloft to view the enemy.

There were those who observed the entire battle
from these metal bunkers.
For them, the long ride home would never be the same.

It was believed, at first, that arson was the cause of the fire. There was a strike going on at Ada Keep's Restaurant and fire investigators thought there was ample reason to suspect foul play.

“Ulysses feared the sirens,
I adored them.
When their voices filled the streets,
I followed, slave to their inducements.
Enchanted by them,
lured into the darkness again and again,
finally, I gave up everything.
And, when they failed to beckon me,
I learned I could, with matches,
always make them wail.”

"James Corona...member of the cooks, waiters and waitresses union...was taken into custody and later released...when after a thorough investigation it proved to be faulty equipment that cause the fire." (Post Standard)

He wasn't the one, that's for sure.
But there were others...
sly, swarthy characters:
dishwashers with dirty fingernails;
waitresses with hungry men to feed;
cooks whose tempers
soared and dipped with the mercury;
and Ada Keep, herself.

The years were burying her.
An unexpected blizzard of flesh
in drifts up to her neck
brought movement to a standstill.
Perhaps it was time to hibernate,
set the skies on fire,
and sleep through the long, cold night.

"Frank Kerlin's body was found at 7AM Sunday to the west of the center of the ruins and its location gave searchers a clue to the whereabouts of Agan and Diamond." (Herald Journal)

He had been neither a sentry nor a navigator.
Ships had toured all the oceans of the world
and never asked direction of him.
Children had been lost in the depths of forests
and no one ever called for him.
In all his brief history, never once had he been summoned
to find lost souls, lost loves, lost lives.

He had, quite simply,
ridden Truck 6 for Hook & Ladder Co. No. 1.
And now, his body was a compass,
a map to find his friends.
No stars set the searchers' course;
he was the sole guide through the ruins.
Their treasures, like him, lay lifeless,
just beyond him to the west.

The rescue workers came from all walks of life. Some pressed into service, others needing to be a part of the great effort, and still others for whatever individual reasons humans seek...to be needed.

“When I was just seventeen, I had me a good job with the city. I was an ash-spreader. Sure it was cold on the streets in February but it was steady work, and a damn sight better than a lot of folks had. When that big fire broke out, you’d of thought all hell shook loose. It was the middle of the night for the love of St. Pete, and only me and a few of the all-nighters, if you get my drift, were staring down Jack Frost.

Well, damn, if the city didn’t volunteer me! I was scared...crazy scared. Eight firemen, boys who knew what they were doing were buried in that huge brick graveyard. My fingers, in cheap cloth gloves, froze together at the base. My nose, still discoloured to my eyes, was frost-bit. But when it was over, hot dog! I was almost as big a hero as those boys I helped to find.

Well, I didn’t exactly find any BUT...but I must of dug a million tons of rubble and thrown a billion bricks out of the way myself. I never did get a better job with the city. The wife took the kids and left one year. Everyone who remembered the fire died. But I was a hero. I WAS there.”

"Johnny Agan had a horror of big fires. Last week he said so after a 3-3 alarm. He planned to retire on pension and take a trip around the world next January." (Post Standard)

Odd, perhaps,
that a fireman should be so frightened of fire.
But the big ones sent burning chills into him,
froze him in their wake.
Perhaps it was just that fear,
the tension between man and nature,
that gave his living such life.

Safety was never a luxury
he could count on...and for once,
with only months to go until pension,
he dreamed of adventures abroad
and a return to a quiet life.

They found his body on Sunday.
It was kneeling
against the easterly center supporting wall,
where it had been left.
His trip was taken,
quiet assured.

When someone we love dies, particularly out of our sight, we often have an unexplained need to have something tangible that bring us, however remotely, in proximity to the moment of loss.

His boots were laid
like wet newspapers
across hot radiators to dry.
The black vulcanized coat,
gashed across the back and
tarnished at the clasps,
was hosed of soot,
polished to a brilliance.
Pounding the dented helmet
into acceptable shape
took the most time.
He might have recognized
all of it as his own.
The wife wanted his things.
"Maybe for the boy,"
someone guessed.
One day, this child would step
into his father's shoes.
The boots were set out in the cold
lest tender toes should burn in them.

As with most tragedies, some people's lives are saved by a sudden change in plan, a late arrival, a miscalculation, a deliberate avoidance or possibly an unexpected illness.

He had been delirious,
three days down with a fever
that scorched and seared,
repeating itself in fiery freezing rage.
"The flu," the doctor said.
And his wife, whose father had been
taken in '98 by influenza,
kept busy vigil by his side.

In his delirium, he fought a dozen fires:
Axe and shovel, hose and ladder,
comrades on shoulders, and the women,
always waiting.
In every dream, he was victor,
every blaze subdued, every man rescued.

When it was over,
tepid water finally cooling him,
flu flushed from his body,
he learned that as he slept,
his Company had fought all the fires
of his imagination.
His eyes, red from weeping,
turned inward in retreat.

"Approximately a dozen women employees of Ada Keep's lost their uniforms and other clothing in lockers in the building. Miss Jane Andrews, who moved a few days ago to an apartment at 210 Harrison Street had straightened up her new living quarters. The only clothing she had yesterday was that she wore home from work Thursday. (Post Standard 2/4/39)

She dreamed those new dresses
would make men burn with passion.
There would be Vogue covers
where, stripped of waitress uniform,
she would drape herself in these dresses,
lounge across a million newsstands
and scorch a continent.
She was hot...her blood boiled,
and on the third day
in the same dress,
her fantasy went up in smoke.

Thomas Dugan was in charge on the night of the Collins Block fire. One of the confidences that the men in his command placed in him was that the Chief would never ask anyone to do anything he would not do himself. However, when the Department was attempting to compile the list of firefighters lost, some must have thought it impossible that Chief Dugan would have entered the building with the others...they telephoned to verify that he was, indeed, not home and off-duty. Needless to say, they did not tell his wife why they were calling.

For his wife, years of living life turned upside down,
days and nights jumbled,
hours no different at dawn than dusk,
the ringing of the phone jarred no nerve,
awakened no sixth sense,
nor stirred her woman's intuition.
For her, it was just another call.
A call more common than dreams
to other men's wives.
For those who called,
those who needed an answer,
the ringing was deadly intrusion;
the answer: an explosion of anguish,
a bomb set off in a quiet cathedral.
HE WAS NOT HOME.
Hours later, when daylight passed the news
of firemen trapped beneath the rubble,
she called to ask of those lost.
His name was given as easily as any other.
It was only then she knew to be afraid
of telephones that ring in the night.

"Lt. Albert G. Young was found at 3:35 PM Saturday...his body bore only a few scratches...those who saw his body believed he had been knocked unconscious by the blow of a great beam which lay across his face and chest." (Post Standard)

In a flash, it was over.
As in an Adirondack dream
where he narrowly escaped
when the side of Whiteface collapsed:
Nature, devastated, was
silent in aphasic awe.

Paralyzed in boots,
like heavy skis mired in wet snow,
his knees snapped under the falling tons.
The light,
as sky opened briefly above him,
was white as mountain tops in summer,
cruel as lightning cracking in winter.

A beam of enormous proportions
pinned his rain-coat-covered body
to the ground like a redwood felled
in a late Spring avalanche.

No one would tell his mother,
aged and ill,
she would not have survived the blow.

Some of the men who died in the Collins Block fire were still young enough to be survived by grandparents. The loss of a child to a grandparent is as different from the loss a parent experiences as is the relationship that each shared with that child.

"I was his grandmother.
I took up this unique place at his birth,
left all the difficulties to his mother
whose fevers I had sweat through,
whose bruises I had bathed and bandaged.
On his skinned knees and elbows,
I had only to deposit soft kisses
and blow away the burn.
There was no pain, no mother-terror for me.
I could enjoy him much more than they.

Had his body burned,
flesh dissolved in smoky air,
winter-white bones charred black,
the intensity of mother-pain
would have carried me to grave with him.
Unscathed, untouched by the blaze,
he was brought back to us.
But all my soft kisses could not heal
nor could my ancient breath blow
searing ache from my own child's heart."

In 1939, graves were dug by hand. As in most of those professions and jobs where dying and death are intrinsic to the work, laborers develop the necessary mind set to function without morbidity. However, the grief shared by a city after the Collins Block fire was most assuredly felt by all whose lives intertwined with the firefighters.

"We was partners, Digger and me.
'A grim business,' some liked to argue
but it suited us just fine.
Mostly it was a job.
I was more the engineer
figurin' out the lay of the land,
settin' down the string from
north to south, east to west,
and makin' big decisions like that.
Digger was the laborer.
It was him what dug the most
and climbed up and down in the plot
where box would settle to dust.
Mostly it was a job.
But this time I had no heart for it.
I knew some of them boys
from the pubs in Skunk City.
We'd go to one of a late night
to blow the smoke and dirt
from our throats, to tell stories...
well, lies really, as boys like to do
when the womin aren't about.
Nobody will tell me they wasn't heroes.
Boys like me, mostly doing a job.
Today, I'll send Digger to run errands.
This little bit of land, I'll ready meself.
Tonight, I'll drink to these boys
and tell lies about how much
I love my job."

***"Clayton Bradshaw (age 22) arrested for refusing to obey a policeman's order to move from the immediate scene of the Collins Block fire...disorderly conduct...pleaded not guilty."
(Post Standard Feb. 4, 1939)***

It was a circus
where center-ring was very elusive.
The background was incredible
and the audience was eager.
How could a performer miss such a show?

He caromed around the rubble,
a juggler over here,
a clown over there.
Only a ringmaster could get his attention;
only a crowd bored with disaster
could give him applause.

For those widows who had children there must have been some sense of hope and comfort in the days that followed the loss of their husbands.

"I bundled them up the children...
wrapped them tightly in memory of him,
tucked in the edges of my loneliness
to shelter me from the biting cold
that crept into my bed.
I let them sleep with me;
made a comforter from their tiny bodies,
gathered them to me like blankets,
pulled the covers over my face,
and feared I'd never sleep again."

Six of the firefighters who died in the Collins Block fire were Roman Catholic. Throughout the three day search for the bodies, priests were in constant attendance. They comforted the living, gave sacraments to the dead, and helped in all aspects of the rescue operation.

“That new Roman collar
dug my throat,
nagged at vocal chords
that earlier had deftly woven Gregorian chants
across the Cathedral ceiling
to create a tenor tapestry to warm myself.

It clutched at a dry and swollen larynx
whose smooth words had lately wrapped
themselves around a sermon like a loose cassock;
insisted that I was a glorified altar boy
gulping experience,
a Faust, in priest’s garb, swallowing the
sacraments and toasting myself with wine.

As I walked through the ruins of dozens of lives,
that new Roman collar led me away from myself;
it took me by a leash,
forced me to be a priest
lest I choke to death.”

Lt. David Lavine of Engine Company No. 16 was the last firefighter to be carried out of the rubble to a waiting coroner's ambulance. He was a member of Temple Adath Yeshurun.

There would be no loud Irishmen
telling outrageous stories,
no bottomless bottle passed between strong hands,
no wake from night to dawn to dance down grief.

He was the only one
for whom the Kaddish would be said,
for whom loved ones would sit Shiva.
He was the only Jew.

Thousands of years of history
dictated those last hours
before his body was borne back to earth.
Because he lived and died,
a child born into his family would bear his name.
Hadn't he done so for another?
Progeny would not remember him as just a hero.
First and foremost, he was a Jew.
For many, they are quite the same.

As the widows of the buried firemen waited for word of their husbands, their only solace was their children...for some of those children, the memories of that long vigil may be similar to this portrait.

"My mother's skin was ashen,
whitewash on weathered wood.
Her eyes, as if transfixed
upon some unknown assailant,
blindly collected my own frightened image
and reflected it back to me.
And, her lips pressed flat and motionless
completed a dismal study in red and white.

Her hand captured mine.
I was his child,
a confused but willing hostage
to all her memories.
I could feel the sudden thinness of her;
the hours stealing layers of life from her body,
as her future was uncovered beneath the street.

Fifty years have passed
since we waited, mother and I.
There, in the cold winter of that warm firehouse,
we both learned how little survives random chaos.
My husband tenants only the smallest parcel of land.
My children offer the fullness of their hands.
I can see my reflection in their eyes.
How appallingly thin I've become.
I was his child for certain
but my portrait is of her."

"First Assistant Fire Chief Charles A. Boynton, age 64, had heroically attempted to save Lt. Lavine by grabbing the latter's coat as he dropped into a yawning pit that opened without warning in the flooring over the basement of the west side of the building. The Chief's wife, Elizabeth, a member of the Women's Auxiliary, had worked tirelessly at the canteen since the fire began. She found her husband at home leaning against the bathtub, dead from an apparent heart attack and stated, 'That fire preyed on his mind, even in his sleep, and he wanted to be there every moment, despite his exhaustion, until the search was over.'" (Herald Journal Feb. 6, 1939)

They had breakfast.
One across from the other,
he spoke of ashes,
she of bacon,
conversations side by side
as only forty years provide.

But in the bathroom,
solid floor beneath his feet,
no hint of fractured walls
and weakened valves,
his weary heart collapsed.

No one saw him in his struggle;
not a single sound was heard.
He quite simply
fell in upon himself,
successful now in reaching back
to catch the others.

There was no really appropriate place for an unmarried woman in 1939. She had no external means of validating herself in that period in our social history when to be the wife of, the mother of, or the child of someone was where identity was placed. She could move out on her own and have her morality suspect or she could remain an adult child in her parents' home. The search for love was hastily followed by the search for self.

“Mother had volunteered me to make sandwiches.
I was a thirty-eight year old spinster
with no man to cook for,
no one to call my name out low
in wistful half-sleep hunger.
That night, I put my feelings between
a thousand slices of bread,
slid thin pieces of myself under ham & cheese,
and spread loneliness like mayonnaise
doled out to troops along the Maginot.
Dozens of rescue workers, scores of firemen,
empty and cold, moved silently past my table.
They were like all the men who moved through my life
and I served them as best I could until the last.
He was a Hook & Ladder man who, starved, pursued me.
I tried to hide behind a brass pole,
to turn my thin flat self into architecture.
But when he spoke, I stopped feeding myself,
bit by bit, to the insatiable crowd.
For others, the fire meant destruction;
me, it nourished, warming my life.”

The two decades preceding the fire were among the worst in American economic history. The collapse of the stock market just ten years earlier contributed to a sense of fiscal instability and search for emotional as well as financial security in the working class. For many, this desire for stability fostered a civil service mentality...steady work for steady pay.

“With ear pressed to Motorola,
I imagined the battles of the war;
listened to the reports of disaster on Wall St.;
felt the cold of the iceberg that sank the Titanic;
followed Elliott Ness’ crimebusting in Chicago.
I knew I didn’t want to marry
a soldier, financier, sailor, policeman.
I sought all the comforts without terror.
I wanted a mailman
whose only threats were pointy-toothed dogs,
broken railings and heavy rain.
But, I fell in love
with a fireman.”

The rumors about the kind of place that Ada Keep ran were still flying fifty years later. The most common rumors were that her restaurant located on the first floor of the Collins Block was a favorite haunt of homosexuals and prostitutes.

"I was 'too delicate' other men noted,
too slight to know of war and women,
impeccable in clothes, my body lightly scented,
like a maiden aunt come for Sunday dinner.
From Monday to Friday,
I closeted myself between the pages
of Mr. Rudolph's ledger,
counted postcards bought and sold.
But on Saturday night,
I put silk next to my flesh,
shaved close to my skin,
and took up my space in a corner
at Ada Keep's
where war and women never counted.
When the Collins Block went down in flames,
more lives were lost than history counts.
Men die in many ways."

"Police Explode 'Confession' of Fire Origin...Story of Former Psychopathic Patient Sounds Fantastic..." (Herald Journal)

"It was simply a case of poor judgment.
I didn't think it through.
I am not crazy.
Do you have papers to prove you are sane?
I do.
It seemed so simple at the time.
Give them what they want and take the reward.
So I said, 'I did it. I set the fire.'
Then this fool came in to spoil it all.
Some guy I knew from school.
He and the cops laughed when I said I was
going to split the dough with a friend.
'When? In fifty years?'
It was simply a case of poor judgment.
I didn't think it through."

"One night about seven years (1982) ago, NEW TIMES photographer Michael Davis was working in his downtown photo lab when he heard yelling and fire bells clanging outside. But from his fourth-floor window in the Courier Building, he saw only the quiet parking lot near the State Tower Building. Davis dismissed the noises until the next day, when he saw a newspaper photo of a ceremony commemorating the anniversary of the historic Collins Block fire. Until then (1939), the Collins Block stood on the site of the parking lot where Davis heard the shouts and bells." (Syracuse New Times October 28-November 4, 1987)

There are no such things as ghosts.

Macbeth complained, and rightly too,
that once there was a time when a man
who was dead, stayed thusly so.

But the yelling, the interminable bells
clanging outside the window give notice that
though nothing exists in reality,
there is commotion a-field.

Something is burning to be heard
somewhere out there
in that vacant lot where the Block once stood.

"The burning of the Collins Block yesterday wiped out the scene of a sensational suicide, as it was classed, more than a third of a century ago." (Post Standard 2/4/39). This story, obviously tragic to the two lovers, was, in essence, an unnecessary and contrived tragedy. However, it insinuated itself in the midst of the news about the fire. It may make some wonder where a restless spirit goes when its haunted house burns down.

"It's true. We agreed to die together. I lost my nerve. What's the big deal? I loved her alright. But she had no business calling me 'dog' and 'coward.' It took guts to take morphine. I took it, too. It was me who pressed the chloroform to her face. It took nerve to watch her die in my arms. It took courage to sit all night by the body.

Even the papers said I was 'desperately in love with her, almost insanely devoted to the woman.' Her husband was doing time in Elmira. Forgery. We couldn't live together, but we could die together. That was our plan. We would unite in the spirit world.

She sent someone for chloroform. Said she had to kill the dog. She killed herself. I wasn't crazy enough to do the same. But with insanity as my defense, I was acquitted. I left Syracuse. I don't know nothing about this fire business. It's a new story. You got no right bringing up old news now."

For the first time in the history of the Syracuse Fire Department, women will be able to be firefighters. For those firemen whose ancestors were members of the SFD, and, who have only daughters, there is now hope that they will not be end of their family to serve the department.

For Captain John Schaeffer, SFD

“Perhaps it is inbred, genetic.
Scores of us, up to fifth generation, think so.
Pablum was hosed out to us.
Career ladders were placed against
the walls of burning buildings.
Our teachers were fathers, grandfathers,
uncles, cousins, brothers.
We fill every station house with history.
We are men of purpose, men of hope.
Our sons can follow us proudly...
And now, our daughters, too.”

"Every cold, windy February widows, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters come downtown for a few minutes and watch the Mayor and the Fire Chief lay a wreath." (Post Standard)

FIREFIGHTERS' MEMORIAL PARK

February never changes.
It's still too damn cold.
For half a century February has not changed.
The speakers change, the speech remains the same.

At the monument,
breath insinuates life's presence
on air determined to freeze living in place.
Easy words crack in mid-air,
their syllables split in brittle frost.
Phrases are simply frozen fragments,
swallowed in wintry winds.
Listen. Nothing can be heard but February.

This year,
I will go to the carved concrete.
I will listen like a wife, a child
like a lover.
As I read the names of men I've come to know...
remember their histories,
revere their heroism,
a merciless wind will puncture memory.
I will turn carelessly to someone standing near,
wife, child...and note that
February is too damn cold.

Warren Ostrander, who survived the Collins Block fire, died in 1988.

This volume was almost finished when you died,
slipped away from life at 86.

I would have come had I known. But you were
lost to me...twice buried before your time.

I hoped, unfairly, that your mind had gone
before your body but I'm told you were as
crisp and clear as any wind that blows fire
hundreds of feet into a winter night.

How much was missed
by my missing you?

Could you have told me dozens of poems?
Would I then ever think this book complete?
Or would I still write my "fire poems"
until my own ashes clogged the pen?



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