

I PRAISE MY MOTHER, THE HOUSE LOVER, AT LAST

who came through the death of her husband and the fire  
from the wood stove ready at last to love her house;

who vowed to it so deeply she didn't even know  
she had vowed never to submit it to loss again;

who went to the dumpster after the workmen left  
to carry the blistered chairs, and the books, swollen  
by fire hoses, and the childhood dresses of her grown  
daughter back into the house where they belonged;

who carefully saved each newspaper and magazine  
and circular and unopened bill addressed to it;

who walked through the stacks of them, and the bags  
of clothes and empty cans, and the disused lamps  
and flowerpots, armed only with her cane;

who kept her door closed to anyone that didn't understand  
her daily, thoughtful housekeeping, speaking in a firm  
voice to neighbors, home-health nurses, tax assessors,  
and me through the screen of her bathroom window;

who imagined a family to bring into the house,  
handymen just like her husband, a gardener, more  
like her daughter, she said, than her real daughter;

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who never noticed the work left undone as she wandered  
with them in the yard, past the collapsing fence,  
and the buckling outbuildings, and the gardens  
where morning glories and vetch bloomed;

who, loving the house with her whole mind, did not see how  
bereft it looked with its cracked walk and dipping roof;

who ignored the wishes of the doctors in acute care  
and returned to live among the pathways inside  
her house just as it was, her greatest wish;

who called for it from her bed in her small, shared room  
at the nursing home with a longing so complete, I felt  
the blow of each stroke that undid her love for it.