CATHY FORD

The Woman Who Took Off All Her Clothes and Set Them on Fire

(for March 8, International Women’s Day, 1992, and for Sharon H. Nelson)

1 ablaze

her hair lit by the light of combustion spontaneous, her body swaying to the crackle drum beat heartsound of fire, she is

the woman who cannot agree the woman who is shunned the woman who raises her voice or her head above the water

water and fire, it is said, do not marry

2 silent

her eyes the eyes of a grandmother in a younger body, it must be genetic; the rooms sway their walls outward, away from her scorched power, she is

the woman who says nothing the woman, not speaking, as she removes her clothes the woman with no scars or visible marks, no open wound

do not open your door, women say to one another to strangers

3 unrepentant

her small hands, spiritual messages or the covering of sex, her beloved breasts, inversion of hair, uncovered, hands refusing to fall into the sign of the cross, she is

the woman who will not compromise the woman with the smell of flesh burning the woman who is another human torch, or naked, simply stands her ground

if you can’t take the heat, my little darling, stay out of the kitchen

4 immoveable

her clarity of perception, that passion for the absolute, she is awakened, undressed, and cannot sleep, she rests but does not give up, she is

the woman in dreams that are messages the woman who was a child, looking back at us the woman who is not yet a walking conflagration, scarred a survivor of incest, or politics; or a once battered wife

go in peace, cherished one, go in peace

5 mountainous

her tiny feet are sparked by the charring of cotton picked by women; of polyester, factory-sewn by women; of linen, cloud smoked, ancient marked by bits of burnt letters, like flesh, she is

the woman whose skeleton shows, she is translucent the woman held upright by ghosts, by the work of women’s hands, the woman who sees every other woman in every other colour, shape, size, life

don’t be a martyr, dearest; it echoes we are finished now with the burning of witches

6 (eternal, etc.)

Cathy Ford lives on Mayne Island in British Columbia. She has published nine books of poetry to date. She is a feminist activist working locally for world peace, global disarmament, and environmental preservation.