

## *Chris Warner*

### **Engulfed**

*In memory of Evelyn Spodnik, a badly burned Wentworth elementary school teacher who died from her injuries... (she) had been lit on fire by the man she was living with, according to the New Hampshire attorney general.*

And what could have driven him into the garage—  
assuming that is, that the gas can wasn't waiting on the bare wood floor  
next to the faded-flowered sofa, bats of stuffing pushing through split seams,  
in the dim grey living room where  
thready drifts of cat hair and house dust spun in the corners, where  
her textbooks tottered and pencils lay scattered and  
math papers needed to be graded, where  
one set of curtains hung twisting,  
the two end hooks missing—  
the room where  
maybe  
his slow-simmering haze first set to raging;  
no, the gas can would have been in the garage, near his tool belt, or maybe  
next to the weed-whacker he was always too tired to use, or  
under the rusting snow-blower, and  
first of all  
he had to  
get to it—  
pushing his way through the kitchen,  
maybe past a white farmer's sink piled deep with last night's soaking dishes,  
maybe down a dark hallway stacked with twine-tied piles of newspaper;  
and  
maybe  
he even had to slam through some side door first,  
pounding over a crushed stone path,  
clutching the cool metal knob in the thick  
of his cracked fingers and grease-stained palm, and then  
opening that door, because maybe  
the garage  
is an entirely separate building.

And you wonder—was it sunny that morning?

And what could have been in his mind as he picked up that gas can?  
Was it like a sitcom soundtrack (but without the laugh track)  
replaying some loop of bickering—

who was supposed to pay the electric bill— or  
had it been paid at all— or  
whose turn to take out the recycling?  
Or was it just the rise and fall the echo the bounce,  
the day in the day out sound of her voice—maybe  
asking for more tea or  
pass the *Lifestyle* section—and  
did she say please?—  
that rake and grate of pathetic pleading—  
or the slight sound of her sighs— maybe  
that hiss of disappointment or depression or derision —or  
was she just tired?— or  
was it just the fact of her breathing?  
Or, maybe it was simply the very sight of her,  
sitting with her face in some book,  
the very sight of her in those terry cloth Wall-Mart shorts—  
faded to pink from too many washings—  
the sight of her fleshy thighs spreading, her sagging knees,  
her crepey-skinned shins rippled with varicose veins.  
And maybe he was thinking how long it had been since those legs—  
rippled or not— were wrapped around his waist.  
Or his neck.  
And maybe he saw her face glaze,  
saw her eyes shift just slightly away—again—  
as he spoke to her—and maybe  
he wanted to know  
what the hell she was looking at off in that distance.

You wonder— what could he have been feeling  
as he carried that gas can back into the house—  
was he burning, his stomach churning,  
thinking of last night's dinner not made  
when he arrived home, tired, in his stained blue coveralls?  
Or, maybe made, but completely unsatisfactory—  
say store-brand hot dogs on just-gone-to-stale buns  
instead of chicken on the grill or  
maybe even  
a steak.  
Or was there just a deep long chill inside,  
burrowed down in the bones of his teeth, in the cold held hinge of his jaw?  
And was he just dying for heat?

You picture his hard fist—the one not gripped around the can handle—hanging stiff  
by his side—squeezed shut.

And what made him begin to splash that gas onto her—

because maybe he first had to set the can down, unscrew  
the black metal cap,  
pick the can back up,  
maybe heaving,  
maybe it was full and  
heavy,  
maybe he  
heard it  
smelled it  
felt it  
sloshing.  
Maybe he was sweating, his  
armpits soaked and stinking.  
Maybe he was holding her down.

And you wonder how he lit the match—  
and was the pack already in his pocket?  
Were his hands shaking, his hot breath panting?  
Maybe he had to set the can down  
again  
and then find the match pack, digging down around the lint,  
finding it,  
pulling it out,  
opening it up, and  
then striking that one match—  
or maybe  
it took  
two.

And was he pinning her ribcage between his thighs, or maybe  
crushing her chest with his knees? And could he feel her, beneath him, pulsing?  
Was that sweet scent of sulfur intoxicating?

Or maybe he just used a Bic lighter.

Maybe the last sound she heard was just a cheap plastic click.

**Chris Warner** began writing in 1993 at Goucher College—fiction, with Madison Smartt Bell, and, working with Elizabeth Spires, one lone poem. She attended graduate school at Harvard University ('97), and did not write creatively again until June 2010, when poetry suddenly began to pour out onto the page. Chris teaches yoga and meditation in Boxford, Massachusetts, and workshops her poetry each Wednesday with Tom Daley. She is writing every day—mostly happily, when the words come, that is!—and is working on letting go of attachment to outcome.