

The Great Fire

by Eric Finney

London: sixteen sixty six;
In the dead of night a small flame licks...
From a bakery in Pudding Lane
A flicker first then a burst of flame.
A house, then a street of houses ablaze,
Fire funnels the narrow passageways
And fanned by wind it quickly spreads.
Londoners scramble from their beds.
After a summer parched with drought
Wooden buildings are all dried out:
On them the fire leaps greedily
And fear and panic now run free.
Loaded carts in crowded streets
Are piled with tables, chairs, beds, sheets:
To salvage something people try —
“Head for the river!” comes the cry
And on the Thames is soon afloat
Anything that will serve as a boat.

Now all the City is aflame,
No fire-fighting worth the name.
King Charles, attired in his nightgown,
Commands the speedy pulling down
Of buildings in the fire’s way:
This done, the inferno loses sway,
With nothing left to feed upon
It gradually subsides, is gone.

Fire, it’s said, cleans and purifies
And though in ashes London lies
The deadly poisons left alive
From the Black Death* in sixty five
Are burned away. Small comfort this
To ease the sense of hopelessness
Of citizens whose homes burned down —
Thousands such in London Town.
St Pauls* has gone, the Guildhall* too:
Londoners have much to do.
The City must be built anew.

the Black Death — a terrible disease
St Pauls — St Paul’s Cathedral
the Guildhall — the City of London town hall