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FOREWORD

The curious title of Patricia Murphy's wonderfully disturbing *Hemming Flames* doesn't become clear to us until the last poem in the book. And, as good titles do, it provides a way of understanding what have been the book's necessities and, in this case, its tonal harshness. The last two lines are, "Yesterday I invented fire. / Today I'm hemming flames." The "today" stands for almost every poem Murphy artfully offers us, as if the act of writing these poems was an attempt to hem what can't easily be hemmed.

Or maybe to think of the paradoxical nature of the title is more instructive. Flames can be extinguished, but can they be hemmed? Perhaps one can only try. Poem after poem delivers a dysfunctional family—father, mother, brother, the speaker herself—with only the slightest redemption in sight. There's a Plathian relentlessness to the book. And, like Plath, Murphy never forgets that she's writing poetry as she indicts ("They would have given us / absolutely everything / they didn't want.") And there's just enough well-phrased complicity in the telling to make us trust the speaker. She wonders, "What if today, I touch everyone I see. / I'm not afraid to hit someone if they need it." And in one of the many poems addressed to the mother, we are told, "I have promised others I will never / want the way you want. / They love me on this condition."

Though some might worry that the book can at times seem to be a tell-all, I never felt that the motive behind it was therapeutic. Patricia Murphy is a maker of poems. If the slight redemption I mentioned above exists, it is in the way we, the readers, are made privy to an ever-expanding consciousness. She knows what she feels, and has felt. But she writes, like the best of writers do, to find the language for what she thinks.

Stephen Dunn

LOSING OUR MILK TEETH

Back then we were all such
good little Bolsheviks.

Now I am that vaguely
familiar character from

a film you cannot name.
What choice did I have

but to disappear from your
house of faulty methods?

You made sure I found you
so you could leave me

with my new name,
accomplice. And so we will

gather for one last parody
of a holiday. Dad will be all

smiles. He'll say, *pass the mother
fucking peas*. And, *could you*

*try not to murder yourself
in front of the children*.

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BRIDGES ALL OVER THE ROOM

I've known my mother
since she fell in love
with the on-call oncologist.
I remember she liked
to read shit novels
over strangers' shoulders
on the airplane. She
learned to name objects
by scent: *citrus, musk.*
She called her pockets slotlets.
She thought all ninjas were chicks.
She used to tell me
I was strong like
it was an order.
Now she's in bed for
what might last my lifetime.
She asked for political asylum
in the lunatic asylum.
I begged her not
to think like Berryman
since there are bridges
all over the room.

MY BROTHER, HOARDING

Now he wants wooden gloves
with ornate carvings of egrets,
detailed cuffs accentuating
the coquettishness of wrist skin.

Now he wakes to darkness
and so he yells, *water, water*.

In comes a shadow
and so he yells, *light*.

Now he is tired.
He secures his long hair
at the nape with a pencil,
a chopstick, or a spoon.

Now he is over 400
lbs and must be
taken to the cattle
ranch for weighing.

Now he phones to say *fire*.
It's as close as we've ever been.

He in my ear,
me in his.