Burning the Heartwood
Also by Janet Sutherland:

Crossing Over
JANET SUTHERLAND

Burning the Heartwood

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## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hearth</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>During long walks</em></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fragment 31</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinnabar</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touching heartsease</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another poem</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cirrus in bed</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the green and gold of the light</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seed</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnes</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The stringing of onions</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firework</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revisions</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackbirds flying</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Itching</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>an image of skin . . .</em></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cat got your tongue?</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gossip</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>In the hospital grounds</em></td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The walled garden</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The road to the beach</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Patricia (Paddy)</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An orchard subject 1946</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The colour of gull’s eggs</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Reckless Sleeper</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>When he had cut up her clothes</em></td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissociation</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the street</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the house of the terracotta warriors</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An incident in Vienna (1991)</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To the Spider in the crevice . . .</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaning over</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>I was quietly writing your name</em></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variegation I (from <em>Crossing Over</em>)</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variegation II (from <em>Crossing Over</em>)</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variegation III (from <em>Crossing Over</em>)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a rose creeps among dunes</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impunity</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What the Keeper saw</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom 1</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom 2</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom 3</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keash Hill</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you kiss a mermaid</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She sweeps</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halcyon days</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roma</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaps</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The view</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spider’s web</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Spent a day in talk</em></td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>for the dreams</em></td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knot garden</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Pool Keeper 1935</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking the ford</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four different kinds of water</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Bigger Splash</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>a white cliff</em></td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deniz aged five</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*That home is not a place . . . (from <em>Crossing Over</em>)</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*But she does cry . . . (from <em>Crossing Over</em>)</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parallax (from <em>Crossing Over</em>)</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In my father’s store room</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crumble</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felling the apple tree</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow plums</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windfall</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>a grey victorian waiting room</em></td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of dew ponds and cattleways (1907)</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covert</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For Lesley and Joseph
HEARTH

The hiss of flame before earth

Sometimes the ear listens
without thought

Unbuttoning the heart
we hear rain
from a wet coat
leaping and cracking
on stone
During long walks

During long walks
a small stone placed in one shoe
anchors the thoughts
Fragment 31

Opposite you he sits,
this man, equal with the gods,
listening to you –
your sweet speech

and your laughter. My heart
lurches when I look
at you, even briefly.
I cannot speak.

My tongue is stopped.
A sly flame runs
under my skin. I can
see nothing. My ears hum.

Sweat drenches me.
I tremble, bleached like
grass. I have come
closer, now, to death.
Cinnabar

He gave me cinnabar, in a small suitcase, just before my ship sailed out of port. In the first days when I dare not walk on deck I would look at the red stain on the soiled leather and remember his hands. Each morning I checked the old barometer for weather, *heel schoon* it said and the sea was flat, silvered. Progress was slow. Sailors called to me. The captain looked away and would not speak.

Later, a swelling sea, *veranderlyk*, and a coastline near enough to hear the breakers crashing against rock. Birds on the cliff tops rising and wheeling, falling as one, gone to nothing. Sunsets were vermilion, madder lake. The water, lapis lazuli and azurite. I could not sleep. The stars reminded me of home. A dress hung in my cabin waiting for landfall. Lamplight drew a face upon its folds. In the creaking of the timbers I heard voices.

One bone black night, I walked on deck, a lead white moon dipped in and out. The sea became the folded downs, a lighthouse flashing endlessly. Near dawn there came a glimmer on the waves, a glaze like mercury on glass. *Bestendig* then, I took my suitcase out and opened it, a fine red dust rose up to darken on the surface of the sea. Though I am emptied too, my alchemist spent all the hidden gold he left in me.
Touching heartsease

my little pretty patch of wilderness
hung in the short term
between desire and passion
turgid with flowers –
broad iris buds
drift of forget
me nots
mazy with sleep
drawn deep across rain
falling soft
warm silent
in a deepening green

today no edges are visible
colour melts back
this is a veiny petal
place
warm laved under tree
before sun
wet with translucence

we wait here without memory
swimming and drowning
touching heartsease
and approaching
honesty
Another poem

those hands that plunge
loam caked to plant
and fish for white roots
in a lusty soil

have rummaged among maps
to find a route through
wrinkled terraces
indentured coombes

you wait to find the sun
to touch
the folded valleys
with a careful thumb

summits and ridges
bound in miniature
your contours plotted
on the edge of spring
Cirrus in bed

I would put
cirrus or
cirrocumulus
to bed
to lay a hair-like filament
across your face

high up a banded linear event
perplexes thought
but wrapped in lace
you open up to touch it with your tongue
In the green and gold of the light

the woman under the tree is
showered with flowers falling
from above
they are paper purple hearts
in the field beyond lie crowns
abundant i enter your dream
quietly and later find myself
tilling the earth
Seed

we are making a path
collecting stones
flint and old buttons from a dead mans shirt

I have let seed fall
here, the tares and the foxgloves drift in
under cover of darkness

birds shit pips into the cracks, the thorns
of the blackberry
harden, tough

skinned stone breaks
and the buds open
Agnes

Agnes has planted her onions in good time – thin green shoots rise in rows. She works her shallow hoe through rampant weeds in May. In summer buttressed ranks seed blue and blowsy globes. Still air surrounds the pungent humid depths where ants and woodlice journey over cracking soil. The swelling domes, the paper-covered monuments she harvests slowly against winter. The seasons fit seamlessly one against the other; her sorrows have many layers.
The stringing of onions

I pushed them in the soil
and left them to grow

on midwinter nights
frost crackled the touch-papers

green tapers pierced spring
each one alone

rising. Minarets, a sky of them
silent, the hidden blue

waiting. On hot still days
tough hollow stems

buttressed the seed-heads
for snails with small intricate shells

to rest on.
Firework

Touch paper
and stand back

ushering kids beyond
the imaginary line
and handing out sparklers

had i forgotten
the fire coming out
as crystals of ice

staring at the diminishing line
tracing a name in joined-up writing
before
Revisions

She woke considering the evidence: the brown dog was still howling in the frozen yard. Since suppertime the stubble field, its bedded flint and cold dark loam, had shrunk. The wisp of snipe had gone along with the fall of woodcock. A cup of water by the bed was porcelain not solid earthenware and Spring had receded. It was snowing again.

The punctuation of her thought had changed as had its metaphor. Field water in thin, clouded sheets hung cold across depressions in the rutted land, and now the hill was not personified she missed its female curve, the tender slope that led to knotted copses, undergrowth, and places she could visit on her own. The dog was brown, her cup was porcelain, her thought as delicate as ice.

Resented but adored, the howling dog would be replaced. She loved the sag of skin around his jaw, the piebald gum, the touch of tartar on his canine teeth, the rough feel of coarse hair along his shoulder blades. But when his constant voice had gone what alteration would she find to yard, to house, and to herself who sheltered there because the dog loved her? She woke considering the evidence.
Blackbirds flying

white threadbare linen, hooks removed, steeped, pounded, placed in vats and raised in mesh to drain then dry, compressed

a winter sub-song heard from undergrowth

as iron gall, dark like a black bird’s eye flowed from the sharpened quill, gum arabic prevented feathering

the warning call with flicking wings and tail

sometimes the sonnet put itself aside for lists of births and deaths and marriages, the cost of fish and ale and wheat for baking bread

a loud and pleasing warbling flutelike song

a cadence rising delicate might be a broken arc of shell in greenish blue another place to move to outside this

on the edges of dense woodland, a song post as permanent as paper scratched with ink